

One Woman's War

BY

ASJA MERCER

In Collaboration with
ROBERT JACKSON

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To my husband Jack Mercer, whose promptings and patience over the years have caused me to recall this story, which I hope will remind readers of the barbarities of the evil twin creeds of Communism and Nazism

THERE WAS no official news about the tragedy that had overwhelmed the country. No one knew where the fighting had been or whether the army's losses had been light or heavy. My mother was beside herself with anxiety about my father's safety and it was quite a relief therefore to see his batman Lapins at the door.

"Kungs Kapteins' compliments," he said, agitatedly, "Kungs Kapteins instructs me to tell you that he will be passing through Riga very shortly."

Then the army was utterly defeated everywhere? A batman's appreciation of an invasion might not be very accurate but it was better than nothing and there was no doubt he was right when he replied that it was. The main army had been smashed but part of father's regiment had managed to avoid capture. My father had sent Lapins ahead of the retreating soldiers with the news as soon as he saw that they must fall back or be taken prisoners.

We sat for a time digesting the information and thinking our own private thoughts over coffee. No one wept—the time was passed for the luxury of tears. "What is to happen now?" asked my elder sister, Elsa.

I was turning the same question over in my mind. "Russia will occupy all Latvia—that is clear," I said, with conviction. "Many of our soldiers will be taken prisoner, impressed perhaps to fight for Russia. The rest will hide in the forests. If they cannot fight the Russians openly, they will do it as guerrillas." I remembered the existence of tentative plans for an underground movement—plans that, when I first heard of them, I thought were rather theatrical.

"But," said another sister, "they cannot live in the forests without food and they cannot fight the Russians without arms. Where will they get them?"

In the last few minutes, I had made up my mind about the part I and my family were to play in the coming struggle against the Russians:

"From us," I said.

I looked at my mother and five sisters, half expecting

there would be some protest but I had misjudged them. Far from protesting, they were eagerly awaiting a lead.

Until that year, life had been untroubled for me, the young stepdaughter of an army captain, whose extravagances, seven children and a liking for parties and vodka, kept him comparatively poor. But mother saw that ends always met. She managed several flat and office blocks in the city owned by the family and in our five-storey house not far from the Post Office entertained cabinet ministers and industrialists as well as senior army officers. It was a gay and carefree life.

Of all the seasons of the year in Latvia, I loved winter best. Spring brought the floods from the high hills, in spite of the dams that were built near the city to keep the water away. Summer was too hot and autumn too wet. But when winter came and the soft snow settled in the streets and on the slopes, sledges and skis could be brought out. Sometimes, with a skate on one foot and with breath steaming, I skimmed all the way to school on whatever frozen patches of water I could find on the pavement or in the gutter. At the week-ends and during vacations there were always trips to Meza Parks, a wealthy suburb whose gentle, snow-covered rises were ideal for ski-ing.

But even as a child, living a comfortable and sheltered if tomboy life in a *bourgeois* society that could, because it must, ignore the tensions all around, I glimpsed occasionally the hard, unpleasant facts of life.

One of my aunts had been a nurse in the Kaiser war and practised as a midwife in the city. With a cousin, I was spending a day with her when my aunt, who was deaf, went out on some errand. Hearing my aunt return, my cousin and I decided for a joke to hide, and climbed on to a tall wardrobe in the consulting room. No sooner had we crawled out of sight than my aunt entered the room.

"There's someone with her," my cousin whispered.

I looked over the edge and saw that my aunt's companion was a young woman who was obviously ill and frightened. On my aunt's instructions, the woman lay down on the couch and my aunt switched on a powerful inspection light.

We heard groans. My aunt's back obscured the prostrate woman but when she turned, I suddenly saw with horror that blood in quantities was pouring from her.

Shaking with fear, my cousin and I retreated from the edge of the wardrobe until my aunt left the room. We heard her go into the kitchen and, trembling, we dropped noiselessly from the wardrobe and scurried out of the room.

The whole incident had left me quite clammy with sweat but I was still anxious to find out what my aunt had been doing in the consulting room—and in the kitchen where I had heard the door of the stove opened and slammed shut again. As soon as my aunt returned to the consulting room, I dragged my cousin into the kitchen. A little fearfully, I opened the door of the stove and saw the fruits of a miscarriage—a small but nearly fully-formed baby being consumed by the wood-fire flames.

But on the whole, life was free from unpleasant shocks. Latvia was prosperous. The great, almost impenetrable fir and pine forests, which spread like vast, comfortable blankets over one third of the country were a source of wealth. The farmers raised cattle, pigs and poultry in abundance. There were few families who could not afford to eat as much skabi kaposti—sauerkraut garnished with pork—as they liked and when the occasion warranted it—and sometimes when it didn't—the strong drink flowed. It was only to be expected that a new and thriving nation should develop chauvinistic tendencies and that they should filter down in a modified form from adults to their children. My sisters and brother came to dislike Slavs of any sort. We distrusted anyone with a Russian-sounding name and my parents did all they could to discourage my friendship even with a Greek Moslem girl, arguing oddly that as I had been brought up in the Lutheran faith, I should not associate with a "foreigner." This did not prevent me from learning Russian and German—one of which was a compulsory second language at school—as well as Polish, Lithuanian and Spanish.

As the daughter of an officer, it was entirely to my liking at school that the teachers dwelt at length on the theme of patriotism. "Your country comes first, even before your parents," they said. This Fascist type of doctrine did not shock me. My teachers spoke of the Latvian heroes of the Kaiser war who had helped the country on the road to freedom—Kolpaks, Coppers, the brothers Bangenrnski, Balodis and others—and our eyes glistened with tears of pride.

We had bought our freedom dearly. Between them, the Germans and the Russians had left my country in ruins. The forests were despoiled without mercy. The machinery in the paper mills and match factories was stolen and the buildings fired. Able-bodied men were compelled to fight first for the Germans, whom they hated and then for the Russians, whom they hated still more.

But I grew up in freedom. My parents were not prudish. As I grew older, I attended with my sisters many dances and gay parties at the Officers' Club in Valdemara Street and enjoyed the Ladies' Nights given by the various eccentric university fraternity societies. Once when my father was bored, he looked across the room and said: "Asja, put on your high heels and I will take you to a Lotto Club for a little gamble." I was a girl at the time but my father was anxious that I should not be ignorant of what went on in the city.

Or was it that he knew better than most of his compatriots that only a short time remained for enjoyment?

The summer of 1919 was one of the most brilliant I ever remembered and it was hardly clouded at all by talk of war. Perhaps the sunshine dulled the wits of the Latvian people, for who thinks of death and destruction when the air is warm and flowers are blooming? Yet history gave no encouragement for the view that the war would stop short of our borders. For more than seven hundred years, Germans, Poles, Russians and Swedes had made my country a cockpit and when finally the Russian yoke was thrown off eighty years before, the wealthy German landowners who formed a small yet powerful group in the country still kept a firm grip on the country. It was not uncommon, for many years after our liberation, for peasants to be forced to leave their small-holdings and work for a pittance making roads and railways. Gradually, however, all that altered.

But since Hitler came to power, the more astute politicians in Latvia had seen the danger that Germany might justify an adventure in the Baltic on the pretext that German minorities living there were being persecuted. As an insurance against this threat, Latvia's rulers had eased up their anti-communist activities and had begun to show a friendliness towards Russia that they did not feel.

The people living their ordinary lives knew little of

these policies and manoeuvres. It would be going too far to say that the difference between the well-to-do and the workers in Latvia in the 'thirties was as great as it was in Russia before the revolution but the difference was certainly the same as the difference between light early in the afternoon and at dusk in winter. People dare not speak openly about politics and only the upper crust of society knew what was happening either inside Latvia or in Europe. Both Russia and Germany kept active underground movements in existence and when either pulled off a *coup*—for example when General Vrangél was abducted, taken to Russia and never heard of again—the matter was hushed up at once to avoid offending the menacing Big Brothers. Even in the influential newspaper *Jaunākās Zinas*, the Vrangél affair received less attention than it did in the foreign press.

By the late 'thirties, my own career was settled and I was a medical student. I was 22 years old. My studies took up most of my time but I could not help at home being secretly alarmed at the talk I heard from guests at my father's parties. As the year 1939 advanced, the gloom among politicians and senior officers became more and more pronounced, and *degvins*, the 96 per cent proof Latvian vodka, seemed to be the only antidote they could think of.

It was too obvious to those who knew the facts that if either Germany or Russia attacked any of the Baltic states, their tiny armies would be as much use as a yapping dog standing in front of a giant steam roller and trying to stop it. All that could be done after defeat must be done by a strong and resolute underground movement. Everybody knew there would be no lack of volunteers for this dangerous work and many young men came to my father's house to discuss in the isolation of his study, problems connected with mining bridges, making bombs and setting up secret ammunition dumps.

Though war came late to Latvia, the tides of war for months had swept some of the flotsam into our country, reminding us how perilously near we were to the maelstrom. When the Polish armies broke, thousands of Polish officers and men poured through the frontier to seek asylum in Latvia. Officially they were interned but in practice they received lavish sympathy and were free to move about anywhere they wished. The only restriction

placed on them was that they must not wear either their leather belts or revolvers in the streets.

In defeat, the Polish officers, in their well-pressed, dark-grey uniforms, were dashing and romantic and captured the hearts of many Latvian girls. Many of the aristocrats came to my father's house and I enjoyed their gaiety and chivalry. But some had a brutal side to their character. Once, when out walking in the street with a Polish captain, we were accosted by a soldier who enquired the way to Carnikova Lilaste, a Latvian Army summer camp where the interned soldiers were housed. Somewhat boorishly, the soldier spoke with a cigarette dangling from his lips. Without answering the question, the captain swiped the soldier across one cheek and then the other. "How dare you speak to me with a cigarette in your mouth?" he shouted as we walked on.

My father was as depressed as anybody else; perhaps more so. Every morning, he would leave the house at eight o'clock for his barracks in Samarinis Street and it was midnight or later before he returned. The pattern was always the same. At the end of the day's training, the officers went to the Mess and the talk would be of the impending struggle and Latvia's fate. The possibilities of whether Russia or Germany would strike first would be discussed at length. The bottles would be brought out and nobody then had the heart to suggest going home until they were emptied. When my father returned at last, exhausted, he was in no mood to sleep and he often demanded that I should play cards with him until four o'clock in the morning. "I don't know how long any of us has to live," he would mutter between hands, "These Red parasites are getting nearer and nearer."

With the Latvian army defeated and already streaming towards Riga, there was not a minute to lose if we were to find arms for the underground.

Arms—guns, grenades, ammunition! A girl's thoughts are not often occupied with such matters but my country had been overrun and I was determined to help those who would fight the invaders.

Arms had priority over food in my thoughts and the only place to get arms in Riga that day was from army barracks. I knew there were arms at my father's barracks just outside the city. Fifth columnists might already have

given information about the barracks to the Russians who would probably have taken over but it was a chance we had to take. We *must* get there in time.

I believed that boldness would reap its reward, and had no intention of going furtively through the city. With the help of Kalnins, our greengrocer, who had a horse and cart, I planned to take our washing to the army laundry; break into the armoury at the barracks and return with a haul of guns, ammunition and grenades. The plan was not as unusual as it sounds because several military families in the flats to which we had moved some time before actually made use of the army laundry.

"But," objected my sister, "who would take laundry for the army to wash on the first day of an occupation?"

"People have to have clean clothes whatever happens," I reminded her.

Kalnins, a gnarled, tough old man whom I had known since childhood, at once agreed to the plan and we set out. We must have looked an incongruous quartette, sitting on the greengrocer's shabby cart but the Russians were not yet used to the sights of the city and no one stopped us.

My heart began to beat faster as we saw the armoury, which was almost half a mile away from the main barracks and fortunately, stood on the edge of a wood. "Stay with the horse and cart and keep a good look out," I said, leaving my mother in a spinney. I reconnoitred the land cautiously with Elsa and Kalnins. The barracks seemed deserted. If a Russian patrol had taken over, they were keeping well out of sight.

"Pretend we are out on an afternoon stroll," I muttered to Kalnins and my sister, as we moved towards the armoury.

At first sight, the outlook was not promising. The stout shutter doors were locked and would obviously resist everything except a bomb. We crept round the entire building and saw that the only way of entering was by a window six feet above the ground, protected by iron bars.

We looked round cautiously again but no one was in sight. "Give me a lift up," I said to Kalnins. Climbing on the greengrocer's broad back, I examined the bars carefully and saw that the top bar was badly rusted. "If

we can get that bar out, there will be enough room for me to squeeze through," I reported.

"I have a rope in the cart," said Kalnins.

Kalnins brought the rope and I climbed on his back again to fix it. My mother, sister Elsa, the greengrocer and I gripped the rope like a tug-o-war team and after three or four heaves, the bar came away.

So far, so good. I tossed the bar out of the way and clambered on Kalnins' back again. It was the work of a moment to smash the window and clear away the glass.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Everything all right," said my mother.

I now began to lever myself through the aperture. I thought it would be easy but I was just beginning to breathe in the dank and acrid air of the armoury when I found I could move no further. "I'm stuck," I shouted.

Sweat began to pour from me when I thought that I should be caught without difficulty if a Russian patrol came on the scene. Should I go on trying to get in—or should I abandon the whole plan, remembering that if I got in, I probably could not get out?

I made up my mind quickly. "Give me a push, Elsa," I called. Elsa pushed and a moment later I, somewhat breathless and rather afraid, had dropped on to the earthen floor inside.

In the fading light, I saw a depressing scene. Boxes of guns and revolvers had been removed from the racks and split open haphazardly. Some of the contents were strewn on the floor. It was clear enough that the last Latvian soldiers to occupy the barracks knew that the Russians had taken the city; knew, too that there was no time to lose if they wished to salvage any of the precious arms for the guerrillas.

If it was important for the soldiers to act quickly, it was even more important for me, a civilian raiding an arms dump, to get my business over speedily. I gathered a number of rifles and revolvers into a heap and, standing on an empty ammunition box, passed them through the window to my mother. An iron bar which the soldiers had used as a jemmy to open boxes lay on the floor and, seizing it, I prised open a large case. To my delight, it containing hand grenades. Taking far greater care than I had used with the guns, I passed out a number to my

companions. "Careful. Take care," I called out constantly.

But rifles and revolvers are useless without ammunition and I searched around hastily to see whether the Latvian soldiers had left any behind. Luckily there was plenty but the cases containing the bullets were so big and heavy that it was useless to think of trying to heave them out of the window.

"Bring a blanket," I called to my mother, "and hold it underneath the window."

While it was being fetched from the cart, I filled an ammunition box lid full of cartridges and when the blanket was in place outside the window, tossed them out carefully.

"Come, Asja," my mother called out at last. "It's time we were going." Though it was tempting to stay, I knew there was no time to lose and obeyed.

Outside the armoury, I found that the work of stowing the guns and hand grenades had been almost completed. Kalnins and my sister were breathless from their exertions. Most of the stolen arms were hidden between sheets and blankets or mixed up with the tea towels and our night-dresses. Finally, to make the picture more disarming, I draped a pair of panties casually over one of the bathtubs containing the stolen ammunition. At that time, I had never heard of the Articles of War or of the Geneva Convention; nor, I suppose, had the others. But we all knew our fate if we were discovered riding on a cart loaded with arms.

"What we must do," said Kalnins, when we were in the cart and on the road again, "is to take it as leisurely as we can. No fuss. No panic. We're just out for a ride."

We jogged along for some time without saying a word but I was trembling with excitement which I could suppress only with difficulty. I could not think farther than the next bend in the winding lane, but there was no point in making plans. Our safety depended not on our own actions but on Fate; if we were stopped and searched, we knew that all the luck in the world would not save us from death.

Kalnins refused to hurry but we turned at last into the main road. My mother clutched my arm. Less than 50 yards away was a patrol of Russian soldiers strung across the road and they were stopping people and vehicles

going in and out of the city. We had no time to turn round. Indeed, we knew that if we tried, a fusillade from the Russians would follow inevitably.

"Keep calm," whispered Kalnins, tensely. I leaned back and gently rummaging among the washing, my fingers ran over the comforting corrugations of a hand grenade. If we had to go, at least I was prepared to take a few of the enemy with me.

A soldier stood at the head of Kalnins' horse and brought the cart to a standstill. "Where are you people going?" demanded the n.c.o. in charge of the patrol.

I recognised his Ukrainian accent and replied in his vernacular. We had been to a farm-house where our washing was done, I said, speaking as calmly as I could. Now we were returning to our home in the city. The others nodded but left the talking to me. I stared as calmly as I could at the ugly face of the n.c.o. and waited for him to step forward and search the cart. I cannot think my face showed any emotion or the soldier would have been suspicious but the hand behind my back trembled so violently that I was in danger of dropping the grenade.

Instead of stepping forward, however, he stepped back. "You speak Russian well," he said patronisingly.

He gave a signal to the soldier at the horse's head and prepared to let us go. But while I had been speaking, I noticed that one of the soldiers had been eyeing me over. He now leaned on the side of the cart. "A pretty speech by a pretty girl," he said, chucking me under the chin.

I recoiled and feigned anger. "What do you think we Latvians are—savages?" I asked.

His comrades laughed good-naturedly at my imitation of a virago and it spurred the soldier on.

"Let's test it," he said, smiling ingratiatingly, "Meet me in the Cafe Matisa (a low cafe on a street corner opposite the market) when I come off duty tonight. Nine o'clock, eh?"

I would willingly have tossed the grenade in his face but calmed myself and switched on a smirk. "All right," I agreed, as the n.c.o. stood aside, "nine o'clock." It was an appointment I would not keep.

It was nearly dusk by the time we crawled home and took our "washing" now considerably heavier up to the kitchen. I felt exhausted yet was filled with a heady

exaltation that we had been able so early to strike a blow against the Russians. We had tasted baffle and now we counted our booty on the kitchen floor; thirty rifles, over 50 revolvers and at least 50 grenades. As the ammunition clinked out of the tin washtubs, I saw that we had captured enough to fill three or four tea chests. The "safest" place we could think of for the grenades was the chimney of our large kitchen stove. We had to take a chance that no one in our absence would light the fire and blow the entire building sky-high.

The Russians had come over the border at Daugavpils, where one of my married sisters lived before she returned to Riga. She had told us of the tension in the town, of the troops massing on the Russian side of the border and of the general belief that an offensive would be launched at any moment Daugavpils was bombed and it was a matter of hours before the Russians arrived on the outskirts of Riga.

Few people slept, and none soundly, in Riga that night but it was our misery rather than the sporadic gunfire on the outskirts of the city that kept us awake. That our country was at last drawn irrevocably into the great conflict was clear. We knew that we could expect no mercy from the Russians—certainly not the *bourgeoisie*, who would be the main targets for their venom. What was to be our fate? A concentration camp? Siberia? Or even worse, interrogation by the NKVD the secret police?

Next day I joined the women and children—no men were to be seen—thronging the streets and was carried along to Krisjanis Barona Street and the station in time to see the arrival of the first Soviet tank. The Russians made it a great occasion. From somewhere, a photographer appeared to take a picture of a fawning Latvian presenting the commander of the tank with a bunch of red roses. Men wearing red armbands on which the hammer and sickle were embossed—the Russian fifth column who dare not show their allegiance openly until now—appeared in increasing numbers and shook the jovial tank crew by the hand. Around the tank, the atmosphere of goodwill seemed to be real enough but the watchers a little distance away were in tears.

Most of the morning, I wandered in the streets, going

aimlessly with the crowds but from time to time I returned home to drink a cup of coffee and tell my mother the news. After the tanks came the soldiers, dressed in their rough, green uniforms, which had the same texture as thick woollen socks, and some with their shirts hanging out. They wore long boots and gloves of all colours which had no doubt been looted on their way from the border to Riga. Some carried portraits of Lenin and Stalin as if they were joining a political demonstration and others held aloft placards with the insulting words "We have brought you freedom," and "All Latvian workers unite." Every now and then, they sang "Katuscha" the well-known Communist song.

I turned to the woman by my side who, like me, was weeping bitterly. "They are Mongolians. Beasts. Clowns," I said. It was true. As I scanned the ranks, I could not detect a spark of humanity in a single face.

If I close my eyes to shut out the pleasant streets of my adopted town and put my hands over my ears to deaden the happy sound of English children at play, I can recall a scene a few days after the Russians arrived, as though it had taken place a short hour ago.

I was standing in a crowd which, ten or more deep in places, lined the wide Brivibas Boulevard in my native city of Riga. Brivibas or Liberation Boulevard. Once when the Russians were here before, it was called Alexander Boulevard after one of the Romanovs, but it was renamed in 1919 after the Russians were driven out. As I glanced at the name-plate fixed on the side of the building opposite me, tears sprang into my eyes. For freedom was in ashes in Latvia. Barely twenty years had passed since, as if by a miracle, our little nation had hacked away the shackles that bound her tightly to Russia. Now fresh shackles were being forged before our eyes on this hot summer day in 1940.

Riga had been dead and frightened. But fear had been succeeded suddenly by caution and at last caution had been thrown to the winds. The streets were packed with men and women of all ages, shouting and gesticulating and muttering threats at the invaders who had stolen what we Latvians had learned to value in the short time they had had it—freedom.

Even the Russians were alarmed and at last gave way

to the insistent cries for President Karlis Ulmanis. The President, an implacable enemy of Communism, had held his office since a *coup d'etat* in 1919 and though the Latvian workers had no particular reason to love him, he had become in the first few days of the occupation, a father-figure for the nation.

A whisper had gone round that Ulmanis was dead; Ulmanis was a prisoner; Ulmanis had been spirited away to Russia. A dozen other rumours inflamed the crowd. "Show us Karlis Ulmanis," they roared.

Presently, a black, highly polished Mercedes appeared in the distance on the Boulevard. It was driven slowly and as it passed, the crowds broke and surged after it. "Ulmanis! Long live Ulmanis!"

The car drew level with where I was standing and I saw the President hunched between high-ranking Russian officers. He was a tall, stoutish man with crew-cut hair which showed iron-grey now that he had removed the opera hat he wore habitually out-of-doors. I remembered a kindly, vivacious face but that day it bore a look of ineffable sadness, as though he knew he had come to the end of a road.

One of the Russians thrust a microphone into his hand and the President's words came falteringly through the loud speaker fixed on the car. "My friends," he said slowly, "All I can tell you is that I will be with you till the last moment. That is all I can say."

The car drove on and I joined in the milling crowd chasing it, feeling that in some way I was sharing the President's grief. For we Latvians were all prisoners, even though some of us still had the illusion of freedom and could at least roam the streets. In June, the sun beats down so fiercely on Riga's houses that people put up shutters at mid-day to keep out the heat. The Russians, I felt as I ran, had put up their shutters again, after taking them down for a brief moment. It was the last time I saw the President. Some said he was taken to Russia that same day to his unknown fate. Certainly he made no more public appearances and I never met anyone who saw him after that slow sad drive through Riga's streets.

THE ARRIVAL that night of my father, tired, travel-stained and hungry sent up our spirits still further, although the news he brought was as black as it could be. "The army does not exist as a fighting army any more," he said, "What chance had we against those hordes. We fought for a time but what was the point of committing mass suicide?"

He ate his skabi kaposti with relish and listened with mild amusement to the soothing, clucking words my mother spoke. "Yes, I am safe," he said, almost gaily, "What has happened belongs to the past. Now, we must look to the future." He did not seem like a man who had stared defeat in the eyes and seen some of his comrades blown to bits by Russian shells and bombs. His handsome face was lined but was more alive than I had known it for many months. The strain of waiting for the invasion had made him morose and short-tempered but now he spoke with quiet confidence.

"Excellent, excellent," he kept repeating when we showed him the arms we had stolen. "I knew you would not be sitting still with your arms folded. We shall need all these and more for the men in the forests."

He had already turned his thoughts away from defeat and was busy planning for the days to come when the Russians would take over the entire country. "To think some of our people were foolish enough to accept Molotov's word that we should never be attacked," he exclaimed scornfully, "A non-aggression pact, indeed! Well, the Russians *have* invaded. They must take the consequences." Tired though he was, he put on a civilian suit and disappeared into the night. When he returned in the small hours with one or two brother officers, he carried into the flat another haul of revolvers, ammunition and other sorts of arms.

It was late when we went to bed but we were up soon after dawn, wondering what the day would bring. The early sun gave promise of warmth and the streets were quickly filled with old and young, pacing restlessly up and down under the shadow of the imposing granite

Latvian Mother monument which dominates the centre of the city. Yet apart from the monotonous shuffle of feet on the pavements and the subdued hum of anxious talk, the capital was strangely quiet. Few drivers reported to take out the noisy trams and buses. The schools and colleges were closed; at such a time, it was out of the question to expect scholars and students to concentrate on lessons and I should certainly not have gone to the Higienas Instituts if it had opened its doors.

But the crisis did not rob my mother of her wits. "Whatever the Russians do, we shall need food," she said. Only a small number of shops had opened and most of them did not take down their shutters but merely left the doors open for casual custom. In any case, not many of the shopkeepers were willing to sell off their precious stocks in view of the uncertain days ahead and after trudging around for hours, our only reward in the way of siege food was a number of bags of dried peas.

My father was not idle. Word went round the city that he was back and throughout the day he was in contact with men who were determined to harass the Russians when they arrived in force. Earnest young men came and held long, low consultations in my father's study. Then, as I sipped coffee, I would hear the harsh noise of metal on metal as they sorted over the arms in the flat and I knew that another consignment was on its way to a safe place.

But in spite of all this activity an indefinable and dangerous air of inertness, of holiday almost, hung over the city. Many of our soldiers were back—miraculously safe, although not parading their uniforms. That at least seemed a good sign. People were in the streets talking freely and the fact that no one was working added to the illusion of a holiday. Children ran around as vigorously as ever, playing their games and nobody had the heart to forbid them or to take much notice. Good weather has a way of softening tragedy of any sort and I found it difficult to believe that on this glorious June day, the body of my country was about to be raped and its soul was in process of being quietly destroyed.

Towards dusk, I was brought sharply to my senses. I went into my father's study to take a jug of coffee to him and a young army lieutenant named Rozita, whom I had often met at parties in army circles. My father looked

up sharply and I saw that he was carefully arranging on a table several black sticks of a substance I had not seen before.

"Gelignite," he said, before I could ask a question,

"Tonight we are going to blow up the Rigas-Daugavas pontoon. We cannot stop the Russians getting into Riga but when that pontoon goes up, it will at least delay them. And, please God, there will be a few Russians on the bridge who will go up with it."

My hand trembled as I poured out cups of coffee and handed them to my father and Rozita. For a moment I could not speak but at last words came tumbling from my lips, "As a special favour may I come with you? Let me help to do something against the Russians."

My father shook his head. "This is not work for a girl," he said, "Stay at home and keep your mother company."

I began to protest and cajole and as my father brushed aside my pleas, found an unexpected ally in Rozita. "I think Asja would be useful to us," he said.

"What can she do that a soldier cannot?"

Rozita explained. There had been too many Latvian soldiers hanging around the bridge while it was being prepared for mining, he said. He had observed it himself that evening. Latvian communists, waiting to welcome their masters, were certain to have become suspicious, since the bridge was easily the most important military objective in the city. "If we have Asja for company until the last moment, it will look as if we are out for an evening stroll after dinner. Father, daughter—and perhaps fiancé," he added mischievously.

I could see that my father did not like the idea but after a little persuasion, he agreed. "Go up and put on your best dress," he said, "If we are going to do it we may as well do the thing properly."

In my life, I had been to many parties but never had I made up more carefully than for this. Riga's summer evenings are long and enchanting but finally the soft warm night came and we walked slowly down Kr Barona Street towards the bridge. The town was still out, taking the air, people were talking in low, excited voices and I thought happily to myself how few would suspect the mission we were about to undertake.

Rozita was right. A suspiciously large number of well

set-up young men were lounging around the approaches to the bridge and it was obvious that if the Latvian communists had been strong enough or had had the nerve, they would have acted to clear them off.

The plan was to blow up the pontoon in the middle and timing was obviously most important. While Rozita and I stood gazing over the side into the sluggish river and looking like any romantically-minded couple of our age, father conferred with others further down the bridge. He returned after a few minutes.

"Everything is prepared," he muttered. "Large forces of Russians will arrive on the bridge within an hour, according to our information. I have given our men the gelignite and at this moment they are fixing it underneath our feet."

Involuntarily, I shuddered. As a soldier's daughter, I knew enough about explosives to realise that a careless move might blow the bridge sky-high prematurely and hurl us all into eternity.

I leaned a little further over the bridge and tried to penetrate the blackness but the night was dark and I could not see the brave saboteurs at work. The only sound was the gentle lapping of the Daugava round the stanchions supporting the pontoon.

My father was determined not to leave the bridge until he was sure that the operation was foolproof and I had plenty of time to repent my action in volunteering to go with him. "Courage," he whispered when I clutched his arm. Presently he went away again and in the darkness I felt the urge to talk, to hear a human voice speaking normally and be reassured that all was well. But when I began to whisper to Rozita he silenced me with a hoarse warning.

At last my father returned. "Come," he said. I pulled my coat around me and the three of us walked back the way we had come. "Not so fast," cautioned my father. "Remember, we are out for an evening stroll."

We hardly spoke a word until we reached the brightly-lit Otto Schwartz café in the centre of the town. Then, as my father pulled out his watch a great roar, like that of ten thousand massed lions, reverberated round the town and people came running from the café into the street. A babble of conversation broke out. A few shots were

fired but after the magnificence of the explosion, they sounded as if they had come from pop-guns.

"A terrible shame," said my father a little sadly, "I don't remember how many million it cost to build. And we, who built it, had to blow it up!"

Three days later, after the main body of the Russians were in full occupation of the city, they held a ceremonial funeral procession in Riga for those who had been blown up on the bridge. The coffins were draped with red flags and the soldiers following bore the inevitable placards praising the comrades who had died to "free" the Latvian people. My father and I exchanged glances as the procession passed on the Brivibas Boulevard. His mouth twitched with a small, satisfied smile. I did not hear him utter a word of sympathy for the "comrades."

The next few days had a nightmare quality that is difficult to describe. The illusory holiday atmosphere vanished, never to return. The main Russian force marched into the city in a silence that must have chilled even the conquering heroes who had won a comparatively bloodless victory. Latvian communists were not much in evidence; no doubt they were busily engaged compiling their lists in collaboration with the NKDV of people who were to be liquidated either immediately or on a more convenient date.

Our new masters went about their task of subduing the country with calculated and frightening precision. One of their first acts was to open the gaols. Walking in the street one morning with a girl friend, I was accosted by an unshaven, bullet-headed man in his middle twenties. He stood in front of us, blocking the pavement and grimacing as though he were half-intoxicated. "*Ko tu seit dari?*" he enquired. ("What are you doing, love?") I gave him what I thought was my haughtiest stare and shouldered my way past.

"I know you," he shouted, "One of these days you will be glad to talk to me. Bourgeois scum!"

My friend and I walked a little quicker but although alarmed we were already too wise in occupation lore to attempt to run in case we were shot down. When we were safely out of earshot, I asked my friend if she knew the man. "That is Kraulits," she replied, "one of the biggest ruffians in Riga. Only a few months ago, he was given a stiff term for beating up and robbing a poor old

shopkeeper. I suppose they've let him out with the rest of the criminals in the Central Cictums."

The Russians wasted no time in attempting to placate the Latvian people, whose culture and traditions they affected to despise. Smelling burning and seeing smoke one morning when I was shopping near Rats Laukums I hurried towards the fire. To my surprise, it was not a building at all but books which, piled into a huge heap in the street, were blazing furiously. A long file of soldiers, passing from the steps of the library to the fire, fed the flames and behaved as noisy children at the sight of the destruction. They shouted and fooled as richly bound Latvian books were hurled onto the fire. A crowd gathered to watch the proceedings and I noticed that several people quickly turned away in disgust. I touched the sleeve of one of the Russian officers in charge of the burning party. "Why do you burn the books?" I asked, shaking my head, as if in innocence. He glanced over his shoulder and seeing that I was young, deigned to answer. "The Latvians have no need of Latvian books," he said. "In future, there will be plenty of Russian books for them to read." I gave what seemed an understanding nod. It was luck for me that I could conceal the hatred in my heart.

But more alarming to the women of Riga than the burning of the books and the looting of the churches were the stories that began to circulate about the behaviour of the Russian troops in the streets, especially after dark. At first, I could not believe my ears. I could understand it when they said they would turn the Grand Opera House into a balalaika music hall, for troops not actually engaged in battle grow discontented and when they are far away from home must be kept amused. I could understand their passion for the potent degivins, for men are the same the world over, and even condone some of the riotous behaviour that followed on drunkenness. But what I began to hear was unbelievable.

I was on a visit to the flat of a school friend and found her in tears. Before they ceased to cry, Latvian women often took refuge in tears but nearly always behind closed doors for they were too proud to show their humiliation to the invader. I asked my friend why she wept. "It's Grandmother," she said.

Grandmother, I remembered, was a somewhat for-

bidding woman, fat and shapeless, who always dressed in black. She, too, was crying but her tears were unshed and I could see that weeping had exhausted her. She told her story in a few, gasping words. She had been foolish to stay out late after calling on an old friend and it was dark when she arrived near her flat. Turning into her own street, she was pounced on by four young Russian soldiers, who took her into an alley and raped her, one after the other.

"But," I said, and stopped.

"Yes," she said sensing my thoughts, "Yes, an old woman like me. I asked them why they did it to an old woman like me and one of them said 'Babuschka, don't you know the saying among Russian soldiers that if you can only rape an old woman, you will come safely through the war?' "

We all knew that there was a curfew and that in any case it was not safe for women to be on the streets after dark but some Latvian women learned it the hard way. In those first days of the occupation there was little we Latvians could do to take our minds off the terrible things that were happening, except to go visiting. Perhaps it would have been better if we had all stayed at home but sorrow shared is sorrow halved; we still had coffee to drink and our spirits were far from broken.

Elsa was a pretty if somewhat featherheaded girl whom I had known since childhood. Her parents, like mine, had a big stone house near the Post Office and we had ski-ed and skated in the winter and often spent our summer holidays together at Edinburg on the coast, where both families had villas. "Go and comfort her, Asja," said Elsa's mother one day when I called on her.

"Comfort her?" I said, puzzled. "I didn't know she was in more need of comfort than anyone else."

I found Elsa in her room, lying rigid on the bed staring up at the ceiling. Her pale face had a glazed, waxen look and her eyes were dark rings, not of the shiny blackness of mascara but the near-blackness that comes from intense misery and weariness. I was with her for twenty minutes before she spoke and then she told me the story. A Russian patrol had caught her as she was going home after seeing friends. As she had no permit, they drove her to the headquarters of the NKVD and took her to see the duty officer. She gave her reason for being

out and explained that she had not noticed how time was passing.

"Our orders are made to be obeyed," said the Russian, "For a short course in obedience, take her to the establishment in Kalku Street."

I knew then what had happened. One of the big houses in Kalku Street had been taken over as a brothel and the Russians staffed it not only with Polish girls they had brought with them but with Latvian girls who transgressed any of their orders. "Fifteen men," she said, as she turned her face to the wall. "But I was lucky. At least they threw me out into the street after only one night there."

But if the Russians treated the Latvians harshly and as if they were no better than animals, their savagery towards the Polish soldiers who had escaped into Latvia was beyond belief. Apparently the Russians had decided that all Poles in Latvia—except for doctors, scientists and engineers—were of no value even as slave labour and their policy was to shoot those they found in the street, officers and men alike. From conversations I had had with Polish officers, I knew that they were well aware of the fate in store if the Russians laid hands on them and as soon as the news of the invasion of Latvia became known, hundreds of Polish soldiers broke out of their camps. The guards did not attempt to stop them—they were themselves among the first to go.

Some of the Poles took to the forests and later joined with Latvians to make common war on the enemy. But others preferred to go into Riga and take a chance of avoiding capture. They hid where they could and ate whatever they could beg or steal. Quite a number managed somehow to get rid of their uniforms and those who did not camouflaged them as much as possible.

About noon one day soon after the Russians came, I was a witness of an act of Russian brutality. A young Polish *podporucznik*, fair haired and unshaven, turned from the side street in which he had been hiding, into Moscow Street, in Riga's East End. He had stripped the badges and buttons from his dark-green tunic but he was still easily recognisable, both by Russians and Latvians, as a Polish soldier. There must have been some urgent reason for his presence in the open.

The patrol was on him before he knew they were there. "Halt," called the n.c.o. in charge.

The Pole quickly guessed that he had little chance of surviving the encounter but decided nevertheless to make a run for freedom. Horrified, fascinated, I stood and watched instead of darting to cover. The Pole had gone no more than ten yards when a volley of shots brought him to his knees and finally, face-downwards, to the ground.

With the rest of the spectators, I now scuttled to the safety of the shop door; on these occasions the Russians had the habit of spraying everybody within sight with shot. The patrol, with rifles pointing at the prostrate man, advanced.

For good measure, one of the Russians put another shot into the twitching Pole but it was a waste of ammunition. The Pole never felt the kick he received in the face nor the prodding of the rifles as they turned him over into the gutter.

The patrol leader handed his rifle to one of the men and crouched beside the fallen man to turn out his pockets. He found little enough—merely a few documents and a letter or two. He was about to rise when he caught sight of the watch the Pole was wearing. Booty! In a matter of seconds, he had taken it from the Pole and strapped it on his own wrist. Then with no more concern than if they had stopped to enquire the way, the patrol resumed its duties.

Two days later, I happened to be in the same district and saw with horror that the body of the murdered Polish soldier was still lying where it had fallen.

Freedom died quickly enough in Riga but hope was harder to kill and defiance was harder still. The Russians filled the streets, the shops, the cafés. They stole our cars, ate our food, commandeered our animals, denied our children education and the old the solace of religion. By day, their unsmiling presence was like a blight; their nocturnal comings and goings were sinister and terrifying. They reminded many of the older citizens of the horrors they had been trying to forget for more than twenty years.

But the young and more desperate spirits were not yet intimidated. A day or two after I saw the Pole shot—a scene I was to see enacted many times with Latvians as

well as Poles the victims—a young army lieutenant named Vitols called at the flat just after dusk.

My father was out but I took him into the study. "Asja, we are going to strike a blow for freedom tonight," he said.

I listened to his plan with growing excitement. One of his comrades had just stolen a Russian staff car from outside the Romas Pagrabs hotel where the officers had gone for an evening's drinking, and it was standing in a nearby street. Two other patriots, trained commandos, had thought of a scheme to surprise and kill Russian soldiers as they left their billet in a quiet house not far away. "If all goes well, they will be here within half an hour with Russian uniforms and perhaps arms."

"And then?" I asked.

"We plan to take a little drive through the town and give the Russians a party."

I was all for aggressive action but I saw at once an objection to Vitols' proposal. "Even in Russian uniforms, you are bound to be stopped. Think! The stolen car . . . the murdered soldiers . . . the Russians are bound to be on the alert."

"No," said Vitols thoughtfully, "unless we are out of luck, the car will not be missed for hours. As for the soldiers, no one will know they are dead until their bodies are found in the morning. Besides, *you* will be with us."

I saw now that my friends had planned cleverly. At this period it was a common sight in Riga to see Russian cars speeding through the streets at night carrying soldiers *and* a single civilian who had been arrested for interrogation by the NKVD. The simple fact that most of the arrests took place at night was to be turned to advantage.

"We shall need grenades, revolvers perhaps, but most of all—*you*."

I prised open the skirting board of the kitchen where most of our stolen weapons were concealed and we laid out ten grenades and some revolvers before we settled down, with what patience we could, to wait for the arrival of our friends.

A light footstep sounded in the hall and Vitols opened the door before the visitors could knock. One glance at the leader's face showed that the plan had gone well so far. He was smiling as he stepped into the room and

behind him, also smiling, came two others carrying bundles of Russian tunics and caps.

"I should have liked to have stayed and croaked a few more," grumbled one of them, as soon as the hasty introductions were over, "As it was, there was only time to kill four."

I left the room to get my best hat and coat and when I returned, my friends had donned the Russian tunics and caps and were stowing grenades. I picked up a couple myself and refused to hand them over to Vitols. I had a loaded revolver in my coat pocket but I was determined to help with the main damage, too.

There was no time for an argument and I was allowed to keep them, although the tough commandos looked at me a trifle nervously. "Let's go," said Vitols, picking up his gun.

We crept out of the flat and when we reached the street, assumed our roles of prisoner and guards. The car driver marched in front, the two commandos on each side of me, and Vitols brought up the rear. One or two loungers in the doorway of the next block of flats looked at us curiously for a moment but the sight of the "Russians" made them disappear quickly indoors. It was never healthy to be a spectator of NKVD arrests.

We reached the car and set off with a roar. It was part of the technique to drive as fast as possible and we sped through the deserted streets unchallenged and unchecked. The deception was working well. Vitols did not intend to throw the grenades indiscriminately—they were too precious to waste. His objective was a Russian plans department building near the junction of Brivibas Boulevard and Elizabetes Sturi where he knew all the secret maps were being traced in preparation for the occupation of Latvia and other Baltic countries.

He described the big, white five-storey house briefly. "There's a drive-in," explained Vitols to the man in the front seat, as we raced at high speed, with tyres screeching, round the corners. "I don't think there is a guard outside the building. The guard is usually inside the front door and I will take care of him." He gave his rifle two or three smart taps. "You two," he said to the commandos, "will throw your grenades through the ground floor windows. You, comrade," he said to the

driver, "will remain at the wheel with the engine running."

"And me?" I had controlled my shaking hands, and the faint feeling of hunger I had experienced as I got into the car had disappeared completely.

"You, Asja? Oh, you stand on the other side of the car and shoot anybody who comes up to interfere. And if you must use your grenades, throw them into the room on the right on the first floor as soon as you see faces appear."

I had now completely regained my self-control and had stopped thinking how much I hated the Russians and concentrated on how much I wanted to *kill* them. To kill calmly, to avenge those of my countrymen who had already died because they had dared to oppose mighty Russia; above all, to kill efficiently. But little time was left for thinking.

The driver slowed up slightly and drove into the run-in carefully to avoid throwing us all off our balance. As Vitols had surmised, there was no guard on the gate and therefore, until we were out of the car, no need to move too hurriedly.

Our disembarkation was so leisurely that I was hardly prepared for it and indeed was surprised at Vitols' fiercely whispered "Now!" But once the word was uttered, things happened at the speed of lightning. The next moment, a succession of grenades had crashed through the curtained windows, revealing before smoke and dust obliterated them, a brilliantly-lighted room in which about a dozen men were at work.

The guard was alert and almost instantly ran from the entrance with a rifle half to his shoulder, ready to deal with intruders. My glimpse of him was momentary. He screamed and fell as a shot from Vitols' rifle hit him.

Between the flashes, the explosions and the muted sound of splintering glass came groans and shouts and the building instantly flared to life.

I felt exhilarated—the same sort of feeling I had as a child at fireworks parties. But action was over almost before it had started and I remembered feeling a spasm of disappointment.

The two commandos raced to the car and the driver made his engine roar.

I felt wildly excited. So far, I had seen no sign of life

in the room on the first floor into which I had been instructed to throw my grenades and for a moment, hesitated, wondering what to do. I excused myself afterwards for this lapse on the ground that, in spite of my orders, I had no wish to waste my bombs and it was, after all, my baptism of action.

But at the sound of running feet from the entrance hall, my irresolution vanished. Taking careful aim, I hurled my grenades one after the other through the open door.

"Asja, come on," shouted Vitols. He grasped me by the arm and I resisted the temptation to break free and take a look at the damage my bombs had done. It must have been considerable, for as we roared through the gate into the safety of the main road, no soldiers and no shots followed us.

We had made our dispersal plans on the way down to the Plans Department building. Although I had by now a forged permit, I did not care to be alone on the streets, especially in possession of a loaded revolver. Vitols instructed the driver to go as near to the flat as was prudent and, feeling limp and suddenly tired, I got out without the formality of saying good-night. By the time I reached the flat, I knew that the car would have been abandoned and my friends have gone their separate ways home.

"Asja," said my mother, when I returned to the flat, "I have been worried about you. Where on earth have you been?"

"I've been to a little party." I said as nonchalantly as I could.

I DO NOT remember exactly when I first became a messenger for the guerrillas living in the Bikiernieku Meza Forest, which begins about five miles out of Riga. I do not think it was before my father left home again to rejoin his regiment but it must have been about that time. No one, not even we who called ourselves patriots, knew how many Latvians and Poles had taken to the forests and were living in conditions that the ancient Letts would have found difficult to endure. The Russians can certainly have had no idea of numbers, although they were painfully aware that the guerrillas were there. The forest came down to the very edges of the rough, hole-ridden tracks which traced a faint, criss-cross pattern across the vast tracks of trees, and a man who knew his way about could lose pursuers within a few seconds of disappearing. Occasionally Russian patrols on horses, bicycles or skis passed along the better and more open tracks but they never knew that sharp eyes watched their movements as they rode by.

I never saw how the guerrillas lived since my contacts with them were at pre-arranged rendez-vous. Whenever I ventured even a little way into the forest—which was not often—I quickly lost my way. If for some reason I could not keep an appointment I had made, the guerrilla concerned would wait until the next day, when he would expect me to turn up at the same time. It was the only way, for I could never have kept an appointment with a contact simply by looking for him; it was the guerrilla who looked for the messenger, not the other way round. I knew they slept under trees or in shelters made from twigs and small boughs. Water of course they could get from the little streams or pools in remote glades. For food, they had to rely on what kind-hearted farmers were able to give them—a little salt pork and black bread perhaps—and what messengers like myself could smuggle out of the city.

It was a hard and monotonous existence in the forests, particularly in the winter, when the snow lay thickly on the ground for weeks on end; it was dangerous when the guerrillas emerged from their fastness and solitude to

harass the Russians with weapons we had smuggled to them. Once—a little later on—I apologised to the gaunt yet philosophical guerrilla for the small consignment of pork I had brought with me and asked him how they were managing. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say he could not complain. "How often do you eat?" I enquired.

He shrugged again. "We're satisfied if we eat some sort of meal every couple of days or so. But," he said, "don't pity us. This is better than slavery."

I did pity the men, but far more I pitied the women—some from Riga's high society—who had fled with their husbands into the forests. Either they turned into tough, Amazonic fighters and fought alongside their husbands or they wilted and grumbled so much that they were allowed to return to Riga and take their chance of avoiding trouble. It is only a brave or an unimaginative woman who can put up with the same clothes day after day, go without cosmetics, use primitive sanitary arrangements and be hungry all at the same time. After more than eighteen years, there are still some guerrillas—men and women—in the forests. I say all honour to them.

But this strays somewhat from the subject of my father. He was a true patriot who loved Latvia intensely, and many times after he returned home following the defeat of the Latvian army, he discussed with my mother how best he could serve his country. He was in constant touch with the men who had gone to the forests and organised supplies of arms and ammunition for them. He intended to go to the forest himself but in the confused situation after the occupation he was not sure what was to happen to the army. "I would go tonight but it would seem that I was deserting my men," he said to mother.

My father had no illusions about the Russians but thought they might still permit the Latvian army to remain in existence for police duties—at the price of subservience to the Soviet. That price, though heavy, would be worth paying to keep the army intact.

So my father reasoned and I think he was pleased when I told him one day that posters were being put up in the city calling on soldiers to assemble on the Army Sports ground. "It says the whole Army is to go on manoeuvres in the provinces near the Russian border," I reported.

"That will make it easier for the Russians to cart us

off to Siberia," joked my father. "It will make the journey all the shorter."

Cars toured the city all day long broadcasting the news of the mobilisation and on the appointed day many soldiers obeyed orders, including my father. "It cannot be for ever," he remarked when he kissed us all good-bye. "Maybe I shall come back sooner than you think." Never was optimism more misplaced.

As I watched the methods of the Russians, I began to notice that in some ways they had a passion for "legality" almost as great as that of the Germans and certainly as farcical. Vishinsky himself followed in the wake of the Soviet army. A Pole? we enquired incredulously, when the Russians began to advertise his visit. Vishinsky is a Polish name and none of my friends had heard of him. But action soon followed his visit. He intimidated the government into resigning and ordered fresh elections to be held. It seemed all very right and proper, we thought, to create a new government to meet new circumstances. So it was, but for one fact—only communists were allowed as candidates. Voting was compulsory and the Russians made use of some of the new élite to enforce a full attendance at the polls. In this case it was the janitor of our block of flats, Krumins, a prematurely old man in his late fifties, who had been efficient enough at spreading salted herring brine on the pavements to melt the snow lying outside the block in winter but was hardly the sort of man to be entrusted with anything else.

Nevertheless, Krumins knocked loudly on the door of the flat shortly after Vishinsky arrived and ordered the family to vote at the Apollo Cinema which was not far away.

I did not like Krumins and I liked his tone even less. But I remembered that he was now a man of power who could bring trouble on the family for an incautious word "What's the point in voting when there is only one candidate?" I asked.

"All the same you will vote," he said in a surly voice. "Take your passport with you. As you vote, it will be stamped. Anybody found with an unstamped passport will be in serious trouble."

The most politically ignorant in the country should not

have been deceived by an election of this sort but a large number of people were taken in when the newly-elected government announced that the first principle of its policy was that the country should remain free.

I met a friend with left-wing sympathies who taunted me, saying: "There, all your fears were unwarranted. The Russians are here but it will make no difference. We shall remain free."

Free indeed! Within a few days, posters covered the hoardings announcing that "All Latvia asks for union with Russia!" Nothing could have been further from the truth. The elections were illegal and at no time was the question of union with Russia mentioned. On the contrary, all except a small minority loathed the Russians—an attitude that was strengthened as the days of occupation wore on.

We now began to feel the full weight of the Russian conqueror as his boot ground our faces into the mud. The churches had all been robbed of their valuables during the first days of the invasion and intact buildings were now put to use either as stores for army equipment or as billets for the soldiers. The famous Peter Church, whose high steeple daring students climbed to leave objects at the top, was a bombed-out ruin.

Priests vanished after a few had been shot out of hand—no one blamed them for going—and since there were neither churches nor priests, there was clearly no need for Sunday. We saw the grim logic of that. So Sunday was abolished and became First day, Monday Second day and so on and we were left without a simple way of counting the periods of our dreary lives.

The Russians did not trouble to introduce rationing; they did not seem to care whether the Latvian people had food to eat or clothes to wear. Thus the queue became part of our miserable existence and staple food like bread became difficult to get. Later on pork was impossible to buy except on the black market, where a pig was worth as much as a fair-sized horse.

Adding insult to injury, we had a good taste of what co-existence is like when the Russians came to live in our own flats and houses. The billeting methods of the Russians were simple and it was made all too clear that no appeals of any sort could be entertained against the orders of the billeting officers. Accompanied by a Latvian

Red, wearing his armband ostentatiously, a Russian officer went from door to door demanding how many rooms there were in each house. Six? And how many people? Six. The verdict inevitably was there were rooms to spare. An order was given peremptorily. Vacate four rooms immediately. Protests that it was impossible, because of the sexes involved, to crowd six people into two rooms were brushed aside.

But there was usually worse to follow. A week or two later, another billeting officer and his Latvian stooge would arrive and the unfortunate six Latvians would find themselves the following day all moved with their belongings into a single room.

We were luckier than most of our neighbours in that we had only one Russian air-force officer named Alexandrov Sovorov and his wife billeted on us, but on the other hand their habits left much to be desired. My mother, as always, outwardly accepted the inevitable and seemed to do what she could to make the Russians comfortable, though in reality most of her acts were designed to keep the unwelcome lodgers out of our hair.

In normal times two women sharing a kitchen spells some trouble but when one is there on sufferance and cooks strong-smelling food into the bargain, the sparks are really bound to fly. My mother saw this clearly and looked out a primus stove. "Take this," she said to Sovorov's wife, "Then you need not worry whether the kitchen is free or not. You can do your cooking in your own quarters."

The following day, my mother went to Sovorov's room for some reason. A pot was boiling merrily on the primus stove, which was standing on the polished top of our grand piano!

But in spite of our overwhelming misery, we were able at times to indulge in laughter, mixed with contempt, at the ways of some of our new masters and mistresses.

A neighbour in the same block came to our flat one day with tears running down her face. At first we thought some terrible disaster had befallen her but we soon saw that the tears were of mirth. She had come across the wife of the officer billeted on her washing her hair in the lavatory pan and rinsing it out by pulling the chain repeatedly.

That was—more or less—a private affair but soon, all

Riga was enjoying a joke at the expense of the ignorant wife of another officer.

"Such a fuss," said a salesman friend, who worked in one of the big Latvian departmental stores, and told me what had happened. A Russian woman, window shopping, had seen a gown she liked in the window and had gone in the shop to buy it.

"But, madam," said my friend, the salesman, "there are no dresses in the window!"

"So," said the woman, haughtily, "You do not wish to sell to me because I am Russian. I will report you to my husband and he will deal with you."

As she stalked out of the shop, the salesman went after her. "If madam will show me the dress, I will certainly arrange the sale," he said.

Together, the two went to the window. "There," said the woman triumphantly, "why do you say you have no gowns? That," pointing, "is the one I want."

"But, madam," said my friend, the salesman, "there gown. It's a nightdress."

The woman turned on him with flashing eyes. "So," she said, angrily, "you are still stubborn. Well, my husband . . ."

My friend saw his predicament and capitulated. The woman bought the gown and remarked that it would look well at the opera, where she intended to go on the following night. There was just enough time to pass the word round for all to enjoy the joke and a ripple of laughter swept through the foyer of the opera house when the woman arrived proudly wearing her nightgown and a pair of shiny galoshes!

But we did not laugh often and when we did, our laughter was laced with grimness. There was little to lighten the dullness of our days and if it had not been for my work as a forest messenger I should have found that time idled along. I was cut off from all my normal activities and as the Higienas Instituts was closed to former Latvian students, I could not continue with my medical work.

The Russians at that time did not seem particularly interested in putting the population to work for them and that was an advantage. Money was still plentiful in

my family in spite of my father's absence. My mother saw that the rents of our flats and houses came in regularly and were paid as far as possible in *lats*, a silver coin which was worth several shillings.

The Russians had already by decree, introduced the rouble as official currency but the rate of exchange was completely unrealistic and Latvian people would accept the rouble only under protest. Those who were forced by hard necessity to go to the banks and exchange their Latvian money for roubles found their savings wiped out in a few weeks and, when they were paid in roubles, their wages were worth a fraction of what they had been before the occupation. The rouble was despised and almost valueless; the *lats* and other silver coins remained the real currency and my mother prudently acquired a considerable stock. "There are three things I will not part with," she said, one day; "my Riga pictures, my children's photographs and my store of silver."

But even if money did not matter, I urgently needed a job in which I could do useful work for my countrymen. A girl I knew named Alma Osols worked as a draughtsman in the department of the Ministry of the Interior responsible for all new buildings and construction. Alma, a good looking blonde, had no political views about which she felt strongly, but her boy friend, later her husband, was a communist in the Politburo and already at 22, had reached the rank of captain. When I went to see Alma in her office, I noticed that several Russian women engineers were working in the same department and that on their desks files often stood marked "secret." Through Alma's somewhat reluctant introduction, I saw her handsome boy friend and asked for a job. "Let me be just a messenger," I pleaded, thinking that as I flitted from department to department, I should have a great opportunity for picking up information that would be of value to the partisans.

"Any connection with the party?" asked the young communist. I had to admit that I had never taken the slightest interest in politics.

"Any member of your family with party connections?" He knew quite well there was not a single name I could give.

"Sorry," said the young man, "The only jobs in

Latvia these days are reserved for party members and sympathisers."

This was, as I knew, a fact. Communism had been illegal in Latvia but banning the party had merely driven it underground and with the arrival of the Russians, the communists came out of many holes and corners to claim their rewards. The Russians were not ungrateful for services the Latvians had rendered and in one engineering works in the city, a man who swept the floors was promoted immediately to be a director.

But it was not long before those who were regarded as members of the former bourgeoisie began to be plagued by visits from Russian officials who were always accompanied by their Latvian lackeys. They would drop into our flat for the ostensible purpose of enquiring about my father's whereabouts, although it was well-known that he had reported for duty with the Latvian army for "manoeuvres." The questions came in torrents: "When did you last hear from him?"; "Did he ever express sympathy with the communists?"; "What were his movements when he returned from the front?"; "Who were his friends?"; "Where is your brother at the present time?"

Questions about my brother were far more difficult to answer than those of my father. We could all say quite truthfully that we had no idea where my father was but we all knew quite well that my brother Karl, the baby of the family and a subaltern, had taken to the forests when the Latvian army was defeated. A few days later he had gone into hiding on a farm on the outskirts of Riga run by the father of a girl friend. Karl did not obey Russian orders to rejoin the army for manoeuvres and from time to time we heard snippets of news about his doings and welfare from friends.

We never knew when visits from the Russians would take place; loud knocking on the door and the barked command to open up was an event we came to dread. Perhaps they hoped to surprise my brother, whom they knew from records had not rejoined the army. That was one possibility.

Or, we always wondered, did they expect to find evidence of sabotage or our cache of arms hidden behind the skirting board in the kitchen? In any case, the

faintest suspicion of anything wrong could have landed all of us in gaol at least, with the certainty of far worse to follow when it suited the convenience of our cold-blooded masters.

Ruthlessness in dealing with defeated people—Russian and others—had no doubt blunted the perceptiveness of the men of the NKVD, and their Latvian helpers were usually too full of their own importance to make the most of their visits. The pale, drawn faces and the trembling hands, stammered replies and the confusion of their victims were what they came to expect as a matter of course. Consequently we all developed a method that was entirely false of presenting injured innocence and womanly helplessness at the events of the past weeks; it seemed to satisfy our tormentors. It was obviously quite impossible for women—or men for that matter—to put up physical resistance to the demands of the secret police and though we stalled, fenced and evaded as questions came thick and fast, we could never prevent them from looting whatever they fancied. As they questioned us, they pulled open cupboards and drawers, scattering the contents into the room.

"So, your father is away with the army?" said a brute one day, opening the door of my father's wardrobe and inspecting closely half a dozen of his suits. "Well, if he has his army uniform to wear, he won't need these suits for the time being. Why should we leave the moths a meal? We can put good clothes to better use. Take these," he said to a soldier, "and put them in my car."

Sometimes they stole articles that had only a sentimental value. My father in his younger days had been one of the best ski-ers in the Latvian army and had won many competitions for which the prizes were often trivial—bronze and silver medals, for instance. But my father treasured them and kept them in a case on a mantelshelf in his room. "Ah, gold!" exclaimed an NKVD official, sweeping the lot into his pocket.

I knew it was useless to try to stop him or tell him that the medals were no more than baubles, for I had noticed that most Russian officials regarded anything that glittered or sparkled as valuable.

There is a proverb which says that a cat is a good forager but even a cat needs help to live. The brave and

hardy guerrillas in the forest were excellent foragers—they had to be to survive—but forests yield little sustaining food. Farmers on the edge of the forests helped them out of their meagre hoards but the farmers were supervised more closely than any other members of the community and had to exercise special care about the help they gave.

"Oh, he's doing no harm," said a farmer friend when I told him that a man was lurking in a field near his farmhouse, "He won't *steal* any food from me."

Nevertheless, he went to his back door and returned with a pitcher of milk and a small loaf of black bread. He knew, he explained, that no guerrilla would rob him, although he might expect food to be left outside so that he could help himself. But all the same, there might be a Russian following the guerrilla and the farmer knew that probably both he and the guerrilla would be shot through the head if food, obviously waiting to be picked up, was found outside the farmhouse door. Food, said my friend, could be put out safely after dark but in the meantime, it was just as well to be on the safe side and take it in.

The Russians, as I have said, can never have known how many guerrillas lay hidden in the forests and we, who acted as their link with our enslaved country, certainly never knew how many shared our work. Some time before the Russians invaded, a friend of my father who was in the Government said to me. "You know, Asja, when the Russians come, there will be great work for you to do. You are young, and not bad looking. You can go anywhere. Why not take a job in a hospital where you will have great opportunities for helping our people who do not surrender? You will be able to get drugs for the wounded. Arms and uniforms will be at your disposal, if you play your cards properly. Remember your duty to Latvia."

Hospital work was closed to me and ironically, youth and "prettiness" were the very qualities that made messenger work difficult. Russian eyes and ears were everywhere and the Russians were suspicious of everyone especially those who were young and were found, for no good reason, in the vicinity of the forests.

Most of the time, forest messengers worked alone and we made it a rule to keep details of our activities strictly

to ourselves. The Russians 'were not particular where they picked up information; a casual word spoken by a neighbour was enough to send a loyal Latvian to NKVD headquarters for interrogation and even children were questioned about the activities of their parents and elders.

I knew that two of my sisters were messengers but we hardly ever discussed what we were doing, except when one of our enterprises needed a second person to carry it out. I strongly suspected that many girls who were brought up in the same sort of environment made almost daily journeys to the forests but we rarely admitted it to each other.

My first contact with a group of forest guerrillas was through a tall, middle-aged officer named Kalnins, whose thin face already bore signs of his severe physical and mental suffering since the invasion. He was an officer of my father's regiment and had his wife with him in the forest; her face was almost as cadaverous as Kalnins' own and its thinness made her hooked, aristocratic nose look more prominent than it was. Some time after my father returned from fighting, he told me that Kalnins needed help. Father assumed automatically that I would be willing to go to the forest as a messenger, as indeed I was. He drew a sketch map of the spot where Kalnins kept his daily rendez-vous and when I had memorised it and could draw it to his satisfaction, he threw it into the fire. But events crowded on each other and though I did not forget Kalnins, what seemed to be more pressing problems were uppermost in my mind.

Our *lats* and cigarettes, of which we had a good store, could still buy eggs, a little black market pork, occasionally a chicken and dried peas and we managed to eat as well as most people in the city. Half way through lunch one day, I said as much to my mother. "Far better than the poor guerrilla . . ."

I stopped in the middle of the word and the food almost choked me. My shame made me blush and I found quite unbearable the thought that I was eating my fill while patriots, whose staple food was leaves and berries, might have waited many a weary day for a messenger to bring at least a few scraps.

I think my mother must have guessed what was passing through my mind. She did not question me after lunch when I walked into the kitchen and hacked the remains

of the chicken into manageable pieces and parcelled up what was left of the bread.

When my father first suggested that I should become a messenger, I thought a good deal about how it was possible to carry food and arms without being stopped and searched. I had always loved pretty clothes but although I now made myself as inconspicuous as I could by wearing the least fashionable dresses in my wardrobe, I was always frightened whenever I went out on ordinary errands that the Russians would challenge me, if only for the purpose of embarrassing me by asking interminable questions.

If young women of my sort were fair game, who, I asked myself, escaped suspicion? Reduced in this way, the problem was simple. Why, a peasant girl!—one of their own sort. The worst that could happen to a peasant girl was that woman-hungry Russian soldiers would occasionally try to date her and as I already knew, it was easy enough to put them off.

I now dressed myself in a pair of blue dungarees I had bought—the baggy sort that country girls always wore at work—and a dark blue shabby looking ski-jacket, into which I stuffed my small food parcels. With a cheap rust-coloured cotton scarf covering my head and tied under my chin, I felt that not even my best friends, much less the representatives of the barbarians, would recognise the former pleasure-loving medical student.

Major Kalnins kept his afternoon watch at three o'clock one day and four o'clock the next, so as to avoid too much regularity but I was not sure at what time he would wait on this particular day—if he was still waiting. I decided to make my rendez-vous at the earlier time, and feeling fluttery and inadequate, I removed all traces of make-up from my face and set out on my brother's bicycle. I cannot pretend that it was a happy ride but I was far less nervous cycling sedately through the city streets than when I reached the open country. It was a warm fine day such as we always get in Latvia in the summer, and the drowsy stillness of the countryside, instead of producing in me a sense of freedom and well-being had precisely the opposite effect; it made me think with overwhelming bitterness of the fate of my country and its faithful citizens, who in my small way I was trying to help.

I passed a peasant or two and smiled the traditional greeting "*labdien*," at the same time wondering warily whether the apparently workaday men might not really be collaborators in disguise, on the look-out for men like Kalnins and his friends. But of enemy patrols in uniform I saw no sign and there were none of the road blocks that had been set up round the city after the first days of the occupation. Yet the very stillness of the trees and fields seemed oppressive and sinister and as the forests started to thicken, I began to imagine that concealed eyes followed me as I pedalled past and that around the next bend in the bumpy track I should find an enemy trap.

The hour hand of my watch pointed to three when I reached the crossroads near my destination. I was so intent on avoiding the pot-holes in the track that it gave me a sharp shock to find that I had really arrived. I was not an expert at map reading but there was no doubt it was the place my father had drawn. Fifty yards ahead of the crossroads was the woodman's hut he had marked. On the road to the right was a small clearing on the left-hand side and in a break in the forest in the distance I saw a small, stone farm-house.

I knew that on the right of the glade, near the entrance, I should find a moss-covered stone which concealed a hole that was deep enough to hold food and arms. I shivered slightly with excitement as I dismounted at the crossroads and pretended to look around, as if uncertain of my way.

There was no one in sight, and I felt enormously relieved; not a bird chirped and the forest insects were silent. Using my head-scarf as any peasant girl would, I wiped the sweat from my forehead and held my breath so that I should not miss the faintest sound an enemy—or friendly—watcher might make.

But I heard nothing. To give myself a little more time, I bent forward and examined the front wheel of my cycle, as if looking for damage that could have been done on my rough ride. This, I thought grimly, would one day really be necessary unless my standard of riding along the forest tracks improved.

I began to control my breathing more easily when I moved into action again. For a few moments in the pause at the crossroads, I had thought of what my fate would be if I was caught in that remote spot with food concealed

in my pockets. The Russians, as I had learned from experience, placed small value on their own lives, let alone those of their victims. A bullet in the back of the neck would have been the penalty and if, later on, somebody had questioned the sentence, officials would have shrugged their shoulders and said: "Who knows? If she did not deserve it for carrying food, she probably did for something else."

But I was still alive, though not feeling by any means as brave as I had been in my mother's kitchen or even in the Riga streets. There was no time left for speculation or hesitation. I mounted my cycle and forcing myself not to look back, rode slowly towards the glade.

As I expected, it was deserted. Propping my cycle against a tree, I paced out twenty steps to the right, as my father had instructed. There was the stone. I looked round again, fearful of a trap. But the stillness was so complete that for a wild moment, I thought of shouting out Kalnins' name just to reassure myself that I was not dreaming and that I was in the forest with food for his guerrillas. The impulse died almost as soon as it was born and pushing the stone aside, I placed the food in a tin at the bottom of the hole.

If I had been observed, what I had done had earned me a quick death at best and a painful, lingering end at worst. Merely caught carrying food, I might have lied and smiled my way out of a difficult situation, for the Russians were susceptible to the charms even of a peasant woman. But the most gullible Russian would not have listened for a moment to excuses for putting food into what was clearly a cache for guerrillas. So, while I felt that my mission was complete, I knew instinctively that for a short time, I dare not relax my vigilance.

I walked as quickly as I could, without actually running, to my cycle and I had my foot on the pedal in readiness for riding away when there was a sharp crash of brushwood immediately behind me. In my fright I almost let my cycle fall and, if my legs would have carried me, I should have run off blindly.

"Just a moment."

The voice spoke in Latvian. Even in my panic, I realised that fact and although I knew there were many Latvian-speaking Russians as well as Latvian traitors, I stopped trembling and turned around.

I was half expecting Kalnins but what I saw startled me. Two figures stood side by side dressed in long black coats which reached almost to their ankles. Black shawls of the type worn by old peasant women covered their heads and most of their features as well. Yet the disguises were hardly efficient for I could tell at a glance that one figure was obviously a man, just as surely as the other was a woman. "Take off your scarf," said the man, in a quiet authoritative tone.

I obeyed. "I think it is Asja," said the man to his companion, coming a step nearer.

The man took off his shawl. "Forgive the disguise," he said, smiling bleakly. "One cannot be too careful. Your father told me you might one day be coming. I see that you resemble your father in looks as well as in courage."

Kalnins shook me warmly by the hand and introduced his wife, who did not speak but merely nodded. He drew both of us behind a clump of trees which screened us from the track outside the glade, and began to question me in a low voice about events in Riga. How were the Russians behaving? What was the news of the army and of my father? How strong and active was the underground in the city? Was it possible to get more arms into the forests?

I gave him what answers I could and since he did not ask directly what I had brought with me, I told him that I had put a little food in the cache. "A few bits of chicken and some black bread," I said. "I am sorry about the bread. It is as hard as cement and almost as uneatable but it is the only sort we can get in Riga now. As soon as it is baked, people queue for it."

The major smiled wistfully, as if the thought even of inedible black bread had stirred his gastric juices. "To think that you should risk your life for a few pieces of black bread," he said.

Our conversation did not last long and it was Kalnins himself who broke it off. "I don't think you have been followed or I should know by now," he said, indicating how well his look-out system was organised. But in urging me to take care on the journey back, he spoke gently as if I had been his own daughter setting off for a joy-ride through busy streets. "If you can bring a revolver and some ammunition, we should be grateful,"

he said. "We are in greater need of weapons to fight with than food, although God knows we need food badly enough."

The calm bearing in misfortune of this middle-aged man and his wife, who all their lives had been accustomed to luxury and gladly renounced it to be free made a profound impression on me. On my way home, I vowed that I would serve them and their companions in any way I could.

Sheer necessity and not ideological conviction drove many Latvians to collaborate with the Russians and this was a great help to the workers in the loosely-bound underground movement.

I had not been making trips to the forest for long before I realised that to stand a chance of escaping suspicion for any length of time, I must have an official document of some sort. Many of the Russian soldiers and n.c.o.s could not read Russian, let alone Latvian but the officers were different. They were extremely suspicious of anything that did not seem to be in order and often it would take several minutes of argument and cajolery before they were satisfied of one's *bona-fides*. The safest way to roam the streets without fear was to be armed with a pass certifying that the bearer worked for the Russians. These passes were issued at police stations and I remembered that a tenant of a flat in our block had a job in a pass-issuing department.

I knew from remarks he had passed that he was not a rabid communist and was collaborating simply to eat. Meeting him on the stairs, I began to play on his sympathy. "The worst of this occupation is the way they are always stopping you and asking for your documents," I said. "I am heartily sick of it."

He said he agreed; it often happened to him. "I am not too involved in politics," he remarked, "but I don't want to see my family go hungry." He could afford to be open with me because he knew quite well that if I denounced him, nobody would believe me, a bourgeoisie.

I went closer to him and said softly in his ear. "You know, the time may come when we shall all be deported to heaven knows where. If that happens, we have in the flat eight or ten of the best paintings in Latvia. As soon as there is news of anything happening to us, I

want you to take the pictures and hide them in your flat."

He was a decent enough man and could have looted the pictures anyway, if he had cared. But no doubt he was looking ahead to the time, which he knew might come, when the Russians would be in retreat from Riga and he would need to prove that he was not an out-and-out communist. He expressed his thanks and I followed up my advantage.

"I cannot get work. I have offered to do anything for the Russians, even act as a messenger." This, I thought, was an ironic touch. "They don't want me. Couldn't you help me by getting a pass to say that I worked for the Russians? After all, I have shown willing."

The man saw my point and said he would see what he could do. A day or two later, when we met in the hall, he took me into the darkest corner and furtively thrust a slip of paper into my hand. It was a stamped pass stating that I was employed as a servant in a Russian officers' mess. "If you ever tell anyone where you got it, I shall be shot in the back," he warned.

With my pass, I could now wander about the town and country in a far easier frame of mind. In Riga, my story when I was stopped was that I was cycling to or from work; in the country, I was getting a breath of fresh air either before or after work.

The Russians did not seem to mind whether Latvians had enough to eat or not and food became harder to get. My mother sometimes protested when I raided her ration store that I must leave some food for the family. If food was short so were arms and our own store of arms was not often replenished by new raids. But hardly a day passed unless, in the afternoon or evening, I made trips to part of the Forest or some other pre-arranged meeting place with either food or ammunition. My luck was excellent and it was not often that I found myself in a tight corner, though it did happen sometimes.

Others who were fighting for their country were not so lucky. I arrived one afternoon at the glade where I had first met Kalnins and dismounting, hid my cycle under some bushes. I had been there so often that I was familiar with almost every tree around the glade and I

knew exactly from where Kalnins and his wife would emerge to greet me.

As I watched and waited, I sensed in the way a hunted animal senses, that something was amiss. Kalnins kept good time—he had all the time in the world in the forest—and seldom came late. But minutes passed and he did not show himself. The old feeling of panic started to grip me and my knees began to shake in a way I had not known since my first days as a messenger. If the Russians had caught me in a trap, I was certain to die, for hidden in the voluminous plaid skirt I was wearing, was a revolver and several rounds of ammunition that Kalnins had asked me to bring.

Nothing except Kalnins' non-appearance had aroused my fears. The silence was unbroken, the rough grass showed no sign of having been disturbed. Because I knew where to look, I could see that the stone covering the cache was in its usual place. Yet my premonition of disaster was so great that I had almost made up my mind to flee when the noise of breaking brushwood five yards away told me that it was too late. I must stand my ground and hope for the best.

The man who broke through the brushwood was unshaven, capless and wild-looking. He wore a leather jerkin and mud-covered trousers and I knew as soon as he spoke that he was Latvian. He came towards me unsmiling and wary. "Asja?" he asked.

I realised at that moment, but not before, that Kalnins and I had stupidly made no preparations for a contingency of this sort. Kalnins had obviously expected to continue our meetings indefinitely. He must have considered that it was I who ran the risks and might therefore one day not appear, not he, who could always escape back into the forest without much trouble.

I nodded at the man's question. "Where are you from?" I asked.

"From Major Kalnins." By his answer, I knew that unless widespread betrayals had taken place, the man was a friend, because not a soul in Riga not even my mother or my sisters, knew that Kalnins was my contact with the guerrillas.

"Why did not Major Kalnins come today?" I asked.

The man answered at once.

"He could not. He is dead."

Kalnins dead! It seemed impossible to believe. Tired, often hungry, racked with care though he was, the man had always seemed indestructible.

But the story of his death was told quickly enough. The guerrillas knew that part of a freshly-killed pig had been set aside for them by a friendly farmer and as there was danger in the mission, Kalnins and his wife had volunteered to fetch it. A Russian patrol, arriving unexpectedly at the farm, discovered Kalnins and set their bloodhounds on him when he took to the woods with his wife. The bloodhounds, followed by their handlers, caught up with Kalnins and his wife before they reached safety and there had been nothing for it but to shoot it out. Kalnins had accounted for four of the patrol before he was killed. His wife, at his side as usual, was killed with him. "The major died like a true patriot," his successor assured me, "I shall be content when my time comes if I can take four of these monsters with me."

Shocked though I was at the death of this brave man and his wife, I knew that the work I had started must go on and made arrangements with the new man Berzins to keep the rendez-vous at the same time and place.

Berzins was the first of many with whom I kept contact; after Kalnins' death I made sure that all our arrangements took into account crises that were bound to occur as the months wore on. Meeting places were changed, code and passwords adopted and after that day, I never left a rendez-vous without fixing the next meeting and the one after that. I bitterly mourned the loss of Kalnins but I was determined not to go the same way myself nor let other brave men go to their deaths because of lack of planning and care.

Kalnins could not have been saved but his death caused a general tightening-up of security arrangements.

Guerrillas continued to come out of the forests to fight, forage and sometimes die but in most cases when they died, it was due to the misfortune of war and not carelessness. Their smallest activities were now controlled by high-ranking Latvian army officers, whose planning left little to chance. In the forest, especially, all operations were planned with precision. The warning and lookout system from the point where the Riga suburbs stopped and the countryside began was highly efficient.

I had reason to be thankful that this was so before the

autumn was out. I set off one sunny afternoon to keep a rendez-vous and was riding along a rough forest track when from behind I was suddenly jerked from my cycle.

A woman's normal reaction to an attack of this sort is to scream but fortunately I did not. I did not hear my attacker come on to me because I was travelling a zig-zag course, concentrating without much success on avoiding pot-holes in the road. At one moment, I was on my cycle, the next I was lying on my face in the prickly bushes a few yards from the track, to where I had been half-carried, half-flung by my assailant.

"Stay there and keep your mouth shut," he muttered. I saw that he had a screwed-up, monkey-like face, was unshaven and walked with quick, lithe steps. More important, he carried a rifle and since I was unarmed, was in a position to enforce his orders. "He is going to kill me," I thought, numbly, and wondered how long it would take and whether it would be painful.

The man picked up my cycle and running back into the bushes, placed it carefully out of sight. His action made me realise that my assailant was really my friend: a guerrilla on watch. Lying down beside me, he unslung his rifle and trained it on the road. At the same time, he took a revolver from his pocket and pressed it into my hand, motioning me to point it also in the direction of the road. "Don't fire until I tell you," he whispered in my ear.

I wriggled myself into a more comfortable position and out of the corner of my eye, glanced at my companion. He seemed relaxed except that his mouth twitched slightly and I thought that with a hair-cut and shave, he would make a good-looking *beau*. His thoughts were certainly not on women. "Listen," he whispered.

I heard the low hum of chattering voices and watched. Into view of the section of the track where I had been hauled unceremoniously from my cycle, came four steel-helmeted Russian soldiers. They were young and from the way they walked, I should say they were plough-boys. Although I strained my ears I could not tell what they were saying but it was apparent they did not guess that eager guns were covering them. They had walked straight into our trap. I steadied my right hand and looked questioningly at my companion. He shook his

head. "There are other patrols in the area," he said. "*A shot would bring them all about our ears.*"

I could scarcely conceal my disappointment but accepted his verdict. The chattering and footsteps died away and after lying motionless for ten minutes, the guerrilla rose. "Stay here," he said, when I began to get up. "The danger may not be over yet. I will be back as soon as I can." He jumped as easily as a cat over some bushes but returned almost at once, and delving into his knap-sack, brought out a grenade. "This will be more useful than a revolver if the Russians find you," he said, placing it gently near my shoulder.

He left me alone to watch and wonder where he had gone, and to ponder once more on the hard and nomadic existence into which some of my countrymen had been forced.

At such moments, when danger was in the air, I found it hard to resist the temptation of indulging in self-pity. I began to ask myself for what sin was I being punished that I should find myself lying in forest undergrowth waiting for a Russian bullet, instead of reading my medical text-books and attending my lectures in Riga. But the mood did not last long and when the guerrilla returned, smiling broadly, I was glad that I had been able to share some of the perils of this brave and militant band of men.

I do not know how long my companion had been in the forest but he had learnt to move as silently as a panther and I had not heard him approach until he was within a few yards of me. He stood above me with his hands in his pockets and his rifle slung over his shoulder. "It is safe for you to go," he said. "The roads are clear as far as your destination. Our lookouts are alert—as usual."

I thanked God that they were alert or I should have tumbled blindly into the hands of the Russian patrol. Then his words struck me as odd. "My destination?" I said, "What do you know of my destination?"

"Oh, we all know you along this road," he grinned. "We keep watch specially for you. We say a little prayer every time you pass that you will live to come another day!"

THE night of June 13, 1919, will be remembered forever in Latvian history as Martyrs' Night. Between the late hours on June 13 and the early hours of the following morning, many thousands of men, women and children were taken forcibly from their homes in Riga and other Latvian cities and sent to work, suffer and die in Siberia.

From the earliest days of the occupation of Latvia, the Russians steadfastly followed a course that could only, in the end, break the spirit and will of the nation. Russian troops instituted a reign of terror; they would just as soon shoot a man as trouble to question him. But they were untutored soldiers, trigger-happy in a foreign country. The NKVD, the plain-clothed secret police, abetted by the Latvian communists, set up torture chambers in the buildings they requisitioned and disposed of such unwanted citizens as they could lay their hands on by throwing them into sewers under their headquarters in Aleksandra Street.

But more dreadful than shooting, which was quick, or torture, which could not go on for ever, was the instrument of deportation, which was used mercilessly against the helpless Latvian people.

Nothing is ever left to chance when the Russians decide to subdue a nation and the operation on the night of June 13 was as terrible as any they perpetrated.

It did not take the Latvians long to become accustomed to the methods of the NKVD. Usually the secret police worked in teams of four—three NKVD men and a Latvian, who was with them to learn his job. The procedure was that the team would drive up to the door of a house or flat at night. They always acted at night; whether it was to cloak their movements with secrecy or to make their acts seem more sinister, I shall never know, but that was their way of working.

One of the team would knock loudly and demand admittance. If the door was not opened quickly enough, it was kicked in. A few minutes later—three or four at

the most—a frightened man, almost hidden from sight in the middle of his circle of captors, would be whisked away to the local NKVD headquarters. It became a macabre joke that it was unsafe to go to bed too early. "Well I am safe for another day," the head of a house said one night when for company I was staying with the family. "They never come after two o'clock."

They came early for Janis Kreslins on the night of June 13. It was just after ten p.m. when they knocked loudly on the door of his flat and called out his name.

Kreslins was in his late forties and had once been a sergeant-major in my father's regiment but he had retired some time before the war. With money he had saved he had bought two old lorries and intended to start his own haulage business. He was a small, energetic man, somewhat fussy in manner but inoffensive. His hobby was painting but he had not had much time for it since the start of the war because of Home Guard duties. My father had allowed Kreslins a flat at a cheap rent in our block and when I heard the knocking on his door, I ran upstairs to find out what was amiss in Kreslins' flat.

The NKVD were in charge when I reached the flat and were conducting their business without any force, though what would have happened had Kreslins resisted I can well imagine. I was quick enough to follow the Russians into the room and saw Kreslins, who had opened the door, backing away from the intruders. The Russian in charge had a list in his hand. "Janis Kreslins?" he asked. Kreslins, whose fussy manner had melted into shakiness, nodded.

"Then get dressed."

"Why do you want me?" asked Kreslins.

"Your name is Janis Kreslins? And your father's name is Igor Kreslins?"

"Yes . . . but why do you come here?"

"You know why," said the officer brusquely. "Don't trouble me with your questions."

By this time more tenants, attracted by the loud knocking, were crowding on to the landing and pushing into the doorway of Kreslins' flat. Kreslins himself was ordered into his bedroom to pack a change of underclothes into a small case. The Russian in charge wandered about the flat, examining photographs and ornaments and the trophies Kreslins had won for shooting when he

was in the Latvian army. But he put them all back; the occasion was obviously too important for the Russian to worry about private loot. Suddenly he looked at the crowd in the doorway. "Everybody who has no business here, clear off immediately or I will take you as well!"

Mrs. Kreslins, a competent woman who ran a hair-dresser's shop, had retired to the kitchen and was weeping hysterically. My mother and I, ignoring the Russians, went to her help. "Quick," said my mother, practical as usual in a crisis, "cut sandwiches. If Kreslins has to go, he must have some food to take with him."

We had just finished making up a sandwich pack as Kreslins entered the kitchen looking glassy-eyed and pale. He embraced his weeping wife with as much emotion as a man in a trance, and without a word, turned to join his escort.

He took a long last look round his sitting-room, noting every object as if he was determined to remember its place for all the years he had to live. Then he seemed to remember that he had been a Latvian soldier. He squared his shoulders and with a dignity that almost brought tears to my eyes, the little man marched off. The door slammed with a finality that seemed intolerable and I heard my mother begin to comfort his sobbing wife. I ran to the window and in a moment saw Kreslins climbing into a lorry that already held more than a dozen wretches in a similar plight.

Scenes like this, and worse, were taking place all over Latvia that night, and by morning the first part of the NKVD's dreadful work had been completed. Like most other people, I slept no more than an hour or two and as soon as I thought it safe, I hurried to a small café nearby where I hoped I should find Lieutenant Vitols—if he had himself escaped the NKVD net. He was there, dressed in a dirty uniform of a porter and sipping coffee moodily with one of the commandos who had been on the grenade-throwing raid with us.

"Whole families have been arrested. Not just men and women but children as well. Some poor devils were not given time to pack a change of clothing," he said. "This is not a round-up for investigation. It is far worse. All night long," he said, sombrely, "the lorries have been rumbling in one direction—towards Precu Stacija."

This we knew could mean only one thing—deportation to Russia, in all probability to Siberia, and in goods trucks, for Precu Stacija was Riga's principal goods station. We realised too with a feeling of hopelessness, that there was nothing we could do to stop the diabolical plan.

"But how can they take people without proper clothing in goods trucks on a long journey to Russia?" I kept exclaiming.

We talked bitterly of the tragedy that was happening for a few moments before I left my companions. Making my way in the strengthening light to the flat, I ransacked our wardrobes for warm clothing, which I made up into a sizeable bundle. "Where are you going, Asja?" asked my mother anxiously.

"To Precu Stacija," I said.

A silent and sullen crowd of some size had gathered at the gloomy railway station, but they were held in check by a force of about 50 special policemen. Inside the railway station, the activity was intense but controlled and if I had not known, I should never have guessed that thousands of people were about to embark on the last journey they would ever make. Long goods trains were being shunted into the marshalling yards and as they were flagged away, others took their place in the loading bays.

I could not see what was happening until I worked my way round the edge of the crowd and dodged behind a shed a little way from the main station. From this point, I gained a momentary glimpse of men and women being herded in batches into open trucks which were not fitted out with seats or in any other way. They walked obediently up the ramps and stood close to each other—a mass of dejected humanity with as little fight left in them as cattle in the same condition—and when it seemed that no more could be packed into the truck, guards pushed them closer still and forced a few more people in. The tall ones could see out through slats at head level but those who were less than five foot six inches tall had to be content with a view of the solid wooden side of the truck. Once inside the truck, their screams and shouts were dreadful to hear.

As I was gazing on the scene with horror and compassion and wondering how the victims could possibly

survive even the shortest of journeys, I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. A big policeman jerked me round and, scowling, asked me what I was doing. "And what's in that bundle?" he demanded.

I said I had brought clothes for those who had not been given enough time to pack their belongings.

"What's happening here is none of your business," said the official roughly, "Be thankful you are not one of them. Now clear off or I can promise that you will join them."

I pulled myself away from his hand and gave him a look of contempt that I hope he remembered for a few hours at least. But I knew in my heart that there was nothing I could do to help or cheer the doomed victims and I went home sadly with my pathetic bundle. If I had had any tears left that day I should have shed them.

Overnight whole households had ceased to exist. Their dwellings were deserted and their movable property left to the greed of the looters—Russian, and I regret to say, Latvian as well. Scarcely a family had not been touched by the Russians' ruthless act and everywhere one saw distraught and heavy-eyed women in black, and men who looked as though they would never smile again. For a time the Russians themselves seemed slightly less boisterous out of grudging respect for the city's mourning.

But the great question on everybody's lips was where the Russians had sent the trains and for a long time it was unanswered. We learned that the trains had first steamed in the direction of Russia and that they had vanished over the border. No one knew what had happened and the underground with all their sources of information could not discover the fate of our unfortunate countrymen. "You would be wise not to ask that question," said an intelligent Latvian communist, from whom I enquired one day.

Weeks later, by accident, I came across a clue. I had been delivering a parcel of pig-beans to a group of guerrillas a few miles from Riga and my route ran for a time near the railway line. As I cycled along, I caught sight of several small scraps of paper on the embankment. Litter is not often seen in the country districts of Latvia, even along the railway lines, and on an im-

pulse, I stopped and picked up the papers. As I read them, a great lump came into my throat.

Each faded slip contained a roughly pencilled message; each was signed. "We are going to an unknown destination" said one; another "We are being sent to Murmansk"; a third "They say we are going to Siberia." Sadder still another note: "We do not know how far we are going or how many will get there. Some were taken out and shot just a few miles away."

To this day only the Russians know what really happened to the men, women and children who were mercilessly deported from their native country on the night of June 13, 1940.

The demands the guerrillas in the forests made on the underground in Riga increased rather than abated as the months passed. Requests for food and arms in the early days had been fairly easy to meet though the problem of getting them to the guerrillas was more difficult. As it was winter our journeys had to be made on skis. But gradually it became as hard to get what the guerrillas wanted as it was to transport the goods to the forests and Lieutenant Vitols and others began to devote more and more time to planning raids that would produce booty rather than dead Russians. If it was possible to combine the two, so much the better but first priority was booty.

We messengers had been aware for a long time that the guerrillas were organised by Latvian army officers and more often than ever, we now carried in addition to food and arms, photographs, copies of Soviet files, notices of troop movements and various military orders. Many of the ambushes that the guerrillas were able to carry out were possible because of information secured by the underground and transmitted by us.

Lieutenant Vitols had two methods of getting information. He persuaded a number of patriots to pose as communists and sidle into jobs in key establishments in the Soviet administration. He urged fraternisation, arguing that a people aloof from the invaders would be cut off from vital sources of information. I myself followed this policy and on all occasions possible, stifled the hatred in my heart and showed friendliness towards Latvian communists as well as Russians. Sometimes the results were

unexpected in more ways than one. "I hope a large stone falls on your head for talking to that communist rat Zebris," snarled a neighbour one day.

Vitols' other method of getting information was more direct. I was with him when he stopped a man in the street who was a bread-and-butter Communist, interested only in earning his living. "You are doing well in the Town Major's office?" said Vitols. The man replied that he was.

"But life is difficult, isn't it?" asked Vitols. "Didn't someone fire a shot at you on your way home last night?" The man nodded. "Some hooligan."

"It was not a hooligan," corrected my friend, "I did it. You are a useful man, you know. You can get all sorts of information that I should like to have. Are you willing to try? If not, the next bullet may come a little closer."

The man licked his dry lips. "But if I am found out, I shall be put against the wall."

"I know patriots who have been put against the wall for doing nothing," said Vitols grimly, "If you do not try, the next bullet will lodge in your head. And don't try and inform on me," said Vitols poking the man with his finger, "I am only one of many in a chain. If I am caught my place will be taken by somebody who can shoot much straighter than I can. And don't forget, the Russians will not be here for ever. You may need a friend one day."

After my dismal failure to get work in a Russian office, the business of acquiring special information was no concern of mine. I was in fact fully occupied as a messenger and as I gained experience, undertook far longer journeys into the forests. Almost always I took documents as well as arms. Guerrillas arranged accommodation on friendly farms when a journey was too long to complete in a day or when the presence of Russian patrols in the district made it prudent to lie low for a time. But inevitably plans miscarried occasionally and I had to fend for myself.

Late one evening a farmer declined to put me up because he expected a check patrol to call on him and I sought the shelter of a haystack for a night. I burrowed into the hay and to my astonishment found that I had uncovered a sleeping man. He opened his eyes but did not speak. He was not wearing Russian uniform and did

not look like a Russian, so I imagined he had been turned away also by the farmer. At any rate, he did not take the interruption seriously but pulled the hay over himself again. I took the hint. I went round the other side of the haystack and made a fresh hole for myself. Next morning, at day-break, we went our separate ways without speaking a word.

Weird encounters of that sort were common enough and one learnt to accept them. The reward of curiosity could be a bullet; it did not pay to ask questions or offer comment.

Messengers were constantly confronted with unusual problems which they were expected to solve without fuss. For instance, underground leaders never liked to have too many arms hidden in the city where the chances of discovery were greater than the country, and it was always necessary to dispose of big hauls quickly. Similarly, the same problems arose if guerrillas urgently needed more arms than could be stowed about the person of one messenger.

For a time we made use of the many carts that carried firewood from place to place but the Soviet patrols began to probe with their bayonets beneath the logs and if they discovered arms, immediately thrust their bayonets into the luckless drivers. When this had happened once or twice, the drivers were naturally more reluctant to co-operate.

Our thoughts turned to other methods. Shortly after Lieut. Vitols had informed me that he was expecting a consignment of stolen arms, I noticed a child's unpolished coffin in the window of an undertaker in one of the poorer streets in Riga. Ironically, the undertakers were in a bad way because although death was a frequent visitor to almost every Riga street, the undertakers could not get wood to make coffins. The last offices were often performed by relatives and the dead were buried hurriedly in common graves, wrapped in sheets, if sheets were to be had. Children only were treated differently and it was still possible to get coffins for them at times.

"Helena," I said to my sister, "that coffin might come in useful when the baby dies. Let's go in and buy it."

My sister protested that we had no child to bury but I told her to be silent and bought the coffin. People

murmured their sympathy when I boarded the tram carrying the coffin in my arms but no one was surprised. At this time it was not unusual to see people trudging through the streets carrying all sorts of articles—chairs, tables, ornaments, kitchen utensils, small cupboards—which they had looted, bought, or hoped to sell.

I was ready with a plan when Vitols told me that his consignment of arms had arrived. "I have a baby's coffin," I said. "Arrange for the guerrillas to be at the cemetery tomorrow night and tell them to dig it up. There won't be a baby in it, of course."

Vitols thought the idea a good one and while he went off to arrange for a grave to be dug in the municipal cemetery—the Bralu Kapi or Heroes' cemetery had been closed because it was used as a hiding and meeting place for anti-communists—I set out to find an old man I knew with a droschka who lived near Moscow street.

The "funeral" took place next morning. My sister and I sweating heavily from apprehension and the effort of carrying the heavy load, smuggled the coffin out of the back entrance of the block. I covered it with a red flag, placed it on the droschka and we all climbed in.

No one, I was glad to see, paid any attention to what we were doing. The old man put his pipe in his pocket, managed to whip his lean horse into a walk and we set off. He was a weather-beaten old fellow who, as he dozed, looked safe and patriarchal and I thought he had no idea that the funeral was anything but real.

I was wrong. "You know," he said rousing himself, "if you are stopped and searched, I shall tell them I knew nothing of what is in the coffin!"

The journey to the cemetery did not take long but it was one of the slowest I have ever known. All the way there we played the part of mourners—I think, to perfection. I covered my face with my hands as though unwilling to show my grief to the world and my sister shrank back as far as she could into the droschka. But I kept a sharp look-out through my fingers and when we were half-way there saw with alarm a party of soldiers approach. They stopped the horse.

I flared into action. "Can't I be left alone to bury my child without interference from you," I said angrily to the Sergeant in charge. He hurriedly apologised as I lifted the edge of the flag and showed him the coffin. "Perhaps

if you remove the flag, you will not be stopped again," he muttered.

As he suggested, I folded the flag back and we jogged along, past the heavy artillery barracks which I knew well and into the uncared-for cemetery.

Journey's end never was more welcome to me. There were one or two groups of people dotted over the cemetery, quietly burying their own dead and the place seemed safe enough. Nevertheless I looked round carefully before I allowed the old man to take the coffin in his arms and carry it to the grave. The grave-digger had not expended much effort on his task and the grave was not more than two or three feet deep.

Gently we lowered the coffin to its resting place and we stood round as if in prayer. As a final gesture, I picked up a handful of earth and sprinkled it on the coffin. Then we decided it was safe to go.

At that moment, I heard a step behind me. I whirled around to find a man with a shovel poised, ready to fill in the grave. "Excuse me," he said "there is so much work to do!" Then I saw his face and felt safe for the first time since we had set out. Lieut. Vitols himself had taken the role of grave-digger.

Life in Riga all through the Russian occupation had a nightmarish quality for those whose "papers" were in order and who were permitted by the Soviets to join in the daily frantic scramble for food and other necessities. For those without "papers" it was far worse; they did not live even for the day but for the minute.

By using Lieut. Vitols' technique of intimidation and infiltration, the underground were able to command a fair supply of false documents and passes but there were never enough to go round and inevitably some men on the run were obliged to live without papers of any sort.

Did I say live? If I had used the word "exist" it would still have been an under-statement. They were hunted remorselessly by the NKVD. Latvian communists and their sympathisers informed on them and they knew when they found a hideout that it was never safe to stay there more than a day or two at a time.

Yet many men, tired of the monotony of life in the forests, or desperate for news of relatives, found their way back to Riga. They lived somehow, they might die

soon, or they submerged themselves in the poorer districts where checks were not so stringent, eventually to return by night to the safety of the forests.

Zile's reason for returning from the forests to Riga was straightforward; his wife Edna had become pregnant for the first time.

I had known Zile since my school days and his wife, though a good deal older, was also a friend of mine. She was a dentist; she was not in any way good-looking but she had a reputation for skill, and her surgery in Riga was flourishing. We had all expected Edna to remain an old maid, but when Zile met her there was a whirlwind romance and they were married. Zile was much younger and very good-looking and no one believed the marriage would last.

But we were wrong, and at great risk to himself Zile made the journey from the forest to the city to find out how Edna was faring.

I saw Zile on the evening of his arrival. The hour of the curfew was approaching when I passed through the main entrance of our block of flats.

The Russians had issued regulations prohibiting lights in entrance halls, and in the gloom I saw no one. But as I was about to climb the stairs a hand caught hold of my sleeve. "Asja," whispered a voice. It was Zile, whom we had heard had fled to the forests when the Latvian army broke up.

"Zile! What are you doing here? Don't you know it is dangerous to be found in Riga? You will be shot and Edna will get into serious trouble. And," I added, "I shall be shot if I am caught talking to you."

Zile shrugged his shoulders and we walked upstairs together. "It's poor Edna I am worried about," he said, "I've been to the surgery to see her but she's not there. The surgery is a Russian casualty station."

I told him that the surgery had been transferred to Terbatas Street and was about to give him the address when I heard footsteps on the stairs below us. By this time we had reached the door of my flat and while talking to Zile, I had put the key in the lock and opened the door. "Quiet," I whispered to Zile, and watched for silhouettes to appear across the large window beside the staircase at the end of the corridor.

I counted one . . . two . . . three figures. Then, just as

Zile pushed me firmly through the flat door, a fourth figure, who must have been ahead, arrived on the floor.

I listened intently behind the door. "Who are you? Let me see your papers," said a grating voice.

"Who are you, may I ask?" countered Zile.

I expected the answer. "NKVD. Let's have no more nonsense. Your papers!"

I could still see Zile through the slightly open door. He was pale and looked boyish and handsome but there was a grimness about his face that I had never seen there before. The footsteps of the rest of the *posse* came nearer just as he backed and as I lost sight of him, I saw Zile had drawn a revolver from the pocket of his dirty ski-jacket.

Zile was in a trap and seemed determined not to be taken alive. There was nothing I could do to help him. On tip-toe I passed through the hall and crept into my bedroom. I had often pondered over what I should do if caught by the NKVD in my flat and had worked out that the only way of escape lay through the bedroom window, along the fire escape and into another flat.

I was glad I had planned so far ahead and now was clear in my mind what I must do in this emergency. I threw up the window quietly but still paused; I was reluctant to leave the doomed, foolhardy Zile, yet I knew that my presence, far from being a help, might prove to be a hindrance to him once the bullets began to fly.

A shot shattered the silence of the flat and immediately I heard the menacing scuffle of feet. The muffled sound of voices came through the closed door of my bedroom, to be followed almost at once by another shot. I guessed then what had happened. Zile had fired first and had burst through the open door of the flat, with another Russian on his heels. Zile had shot again and brought down the man in the doorway but his body had wedged the door open and Zile had been compelled to retreat into the flat.

I stood with one leg over the window ledge, petrified with fright, and heard the sound of feet moving cautiously around the flat, stumbling against furniture and sweeping off ornaments as the men strove to find each other.

"Surrender," growled a voice in Russian. "You will never escape. Surrender."

A firm, high-pitched voice answered in Latvian. "Surrender? Never, you swine, never."

The precious seconds still left in which my escape was possible had now run out. At any moment the fumbling, men with murder in their hearts might open my bedroom door and carry on the fight around my feet. I had no wish to witness what I knew would be a struggle to the death, still less, bring unnecessary suspicion on myself if by chance, one of the NKVD men managed to survive the duel. Hastily, I threw my other leg across the window ledge and dropped on to the fire escape. The sharp sound of my heels striking the ironwork of the escape coincided with another shot. I had escaped just in time.

I believed that with one or two exceptions, all the tenants in the flats were friends who could be trusted and I was sure that I could claim sanctuary almost anywhere in the block, if only I could get in.

The difficulty was to find an unlocked window; naturally at a time like this, Latvians were not in the habit of making the work of burglars and thugs easier than need be.

For some minutes I groped in the darkness along the fire escape, testing windows. I was almost in tears at the thought that I might be captured when I was on the threshold of safety. Another shot increased my anxiety but at last I found a window that I could push up easily. I did a quick calculation before sliding feet first through the window. Unless I was mistaken, I was entering the flat of Kundze Upite, a friend on whom I knew I could rely.

My calculation was right. The room I had entered was very dark and as soon as my feet touched the floor, I began to feel my way towards a tiny shaft of light that showed under the door. But between the door and the window was a divan which I had neither seen nor felt and in my haste, I fell over it with a crash to the floor. I was not surprised when the door slowly opened and saw Kundze Upite peering into the room; her hand was pressed nervously to her mouth, as if she was managing to stifle a scream only by a great effort. After the shots and my descent into her bedroom this was understandable.

"Don't be frightened, Kundze Upite," I said in a low voice. "It is Asja."

Pushing the door open to let more light into the room,

Kundze Upite recovered her nerve. She hurried forward, helped me to my feet and taking me by the arm, led me into the lounge. The light, and her flat, friendly face were an immediate tonic to me and, resisting an impulse to burst into tears, I sat down, feeling weak and worn out. In the scramble along the fire escape, I had bruised myself and torn my stockings. My hands were grimy from contact with the windows but for the time being I felt safe.

"What are you doing? What's happening along the corridor? Why is all that shooting going on?" The questions poured from Kundze Upite as she put her arms round my shoulders to comfort me.

It is a sad commentary on the times that although I trusted Kundze Upite and was grateful for her help, I could not bring myself to give her a truthful account of what had happened. I improvised a story and hoped she would not press me for further details. I said I had been alone in the flat when shooting had started outside the front door. "I don't know who was doing the shooting, my only thought was to get away and find some company. These are terrible times we are living in, Kundze Upite," I said dolefully.

Kundze Upite was a simple soul, not given to thinking much beyond the flat she lived in, still less about the resistance to the Russians, and in a short time we were chatting about the old times and the difficulties of adjusting ourselves to the sort of life we now had to live. But while I listened to her artless chatter, I listened with greater concentration to the sounds I could hear along the corridor.

The scene I have described may seem macabre to those whose country has never been overrun by murderous invaders, but in Riga we had become accustomed to sudden and unexplained shots in the night, to screams coming unexpectedly out of the darkness and to the violent deaths both of loved ones and total strangers.

It was wise, we had learned from harsh experience, never to intrude upon scuffles and quarrels, political or private. When the bullets flew and the knives flashed, the safer if more cowardly course was to go to earth and stay there until the trouble had died down. A body in the doorway, in the corridor, in the gutter? It could have been yours, citizen, if you had chanced along the

way a minute or two earlier—or later. This was our philosophy and by it, we had so far managed to stay alive.

Our Latvian neighbours I knew, would not put their noses willingly inside our flat to find out what the shooting was about, even if the door was wide open. However loud the commotion, their front doors would remain shut, if necessary until morning.

The first footsteps I heard as I chatted inconsequentially to Kundze Upite must have been of a Latvian returning home at curfew-time. It was someone who walked normally until he reached what I judged to be the door of our flat. The footsteps became softer and slower; the man was almost creeping along. Then he sprinted suddenly though still quietly down the corridor to get as far as possible from what he had seen.

Other footsteps followed; I heard the measured tread of officials and the heavy-booted clatter of soldiers on the marble floor. Doors slammed, rifles bumped, commands were uttered; men stumbled slowly along the corridor as if they were carrying heavy burdens; and through it all we chatted about nothing.

I could imagine all that was happening although I could see nothing. After the shooting, one member of the NKVD at least must have survived and rushed for help. A patrol had arrived to remove the bodies and I could picture them being carried downstairs, Zile, perhaps bumping on every step. Unaware of my thoughts, Kundze Upite droned on, interspersing her conversation with exclamations of surprise at the events that had brought me to her flat. Presently, Kundze Upite had no competition. The corridors were silent; the block might have been a vast mortuary.

The ormolu clock on Kundze Upite's mantelpiece struck eleven before I decided it was safe to leave her comforting presence. I did not know whether soldiers or policemen had been left behind in the flat to seize the tenants when they returned but it seemed to me that the sensible course would be to pretend that I knew nothing of the night's shootings. No one had seen me talking to Zile, and Kundze Upite would confirm that I had passed the evening with her. The only point—but of course, an important one—that might require explanation was the open door of the flat and the obvious answer was that

Zile was a burglar, whom the NKVD had surprised in the act of breaking in. Poor Zile! I could not think of him now but only of myself.

Trembling slightly, I said good night to Kundze Upite and passed quickly along the corridor. All seemed normal. But when I opened the door of the flat—fortunately I had slipped the key in my pocket while talking to Zile—I saw a lurid sight. The walls of the hall were spattered with blood and furniture had been overturned and smashed. The door of one of the bedrooms was held by a single hinge.

“Who’s there?”

The sound of my mother’s voice calling from the kitchen startled me. She had returned with my sister a few minutes earlier after visiting other tenants in the block and even her composure had been shattered by what she had found in the flat. “What can have happened, Asja?” she asked. “And where have you been?”

Speaking in a low voice, I told her of the fight Zile had put up against the NKVD. “He either killed or wounded some of them in the hall and barricaded himself in Sigrida’s bedroom,” I said, reconstructing the scene from the damage I saw. “They must have broken the door down to take him before he could get out of the window. I hope he is dead—for his own sake.” I said, passionately. “Poor Zile. Poor Edna.”

“And what about us?” rejoined my mother, somewhat sharply. “How shall we explain away a fight of this sort in our flat?”

None of us felt inclined to go to bed and my mother suggested that we might mop up some of the blood and put the furniture straight. “No,” I said, “let us leave it just as it is until morning. *They* will be back again asking questions, you may be sure of that.”

I slept lightly and my sleep was disturbed by visions of Zile’s lean and desperate face as he held his revolver ready to fight for his life. When the morning sun came streaming into my room, I awoke and putting on a dressing gown went into the kitchen. My mother was already busy making coffee but she looked heavy-eyed and anxious. “I don’t know what we are going to do, Asja,” she said. “They are sure to be back today.”

Before we had finished our coffee soldiers signalled

their arrival by battering on the front door with their rifle butts.

My mother and I looked across towards the door at the same time. In line with the door was an arm-chair and as we looked, our eyes rested simultaneously on a shiny object. A revolver. "My God," whispered my mother. The revolver must have been there all night; it could only have belonged to Zile or to one of the NKVD and had been over-looked when the bodies were removed after the fight. Probably in the half-light and confusion nobody had noticed it.

Before I could move my mother acted. Striding across the room, she picked up the revolver, slid it inside her blouse and drew tightly round her the woollen cardigan she was wearing. I could only pray that it would not be noticed. My sister stood by the door and on a nod from my mother, opened it.

"I was not aware that the door bell was out of order," said my mother.

The three rough-looking Russian soldiers who had entered were in charge of a Latvian named Zarins, a fair-complexioned, match-stalk of a man, whom I knew by sight and repute. He had been a prominent member of one of the biggest communist "cells," before the Russians occupied Latvia and for services to his creed, had been given a high position in the Latvian security forces. His manner was arrogant and disdainful.

My mother followed Zarins and the soldiers into the lounge. "Why are we honoured by this visit?" she demanded, sarcastically, drawing her cardigan tightly around her and concealing the bulge made by the revolver with her forearm.

Zarins began to pace up and down the room. His beady eyes roved restlessly over the walls from floor to ceiling and he stopped frequently to peer at a photograph or examine a book or ornament.

"What was going on here last night?" he demanded, suddenly.

"That," said my mother, "that is what we all would like to know. It seems to be safe nowhere. We went out on a visit to a neighbour and on our return, we found our flat wrecked. There is blood everywhere, as you can see."

Zarins paced around like a hungry tiger in a cage. "How many men live in this flat?"

"There were two," said my mother.

"Two?" said Zarins, quickly.

"Yes, two. My husband and my son. But my husband is with the army and my son was killed fighting your friends."

Zarins inclined his head at this answer. "A man was here last night," he said. "Who could *he* have been?"

My sister began to sob at this persistent questioning and I felt like joining her but my mother remained calm. "A man?" she said incredulously. "All I know is that my flat was broken into and my furniture ruined. If my husband had been at home, it would not have happened. Why can't you protect defenceless women from such acts of brigandage?"

Whatever he may have suspected, Zarins saw that his interrogation was unlikely to carry him further and changed his hectoring tone. "Five men died in this flat last night," he informed us. "Four of them lost their lives trying to capture a criminal. The criminal shot himself and so saved our men the trouble."

I longed to reverse the roles and become the questioner but knew it would have been unwise to show curiosity. In any case, it was clear that Zile had died a hero's death and I was not greatly interested in the fate of the Russians, except that I wondered how Zile had come to miss with one of his bullets—assuming that his gun had been fully loaded. In such a plight, Zile could not afford to waste ammunition.

"I must search the flat," said Zarins, calling the sheepish Russians forward. All through the interrogation, I had noticed that as usual the soldiers had done nothing but gaze goggle-eyed at my sister and I, as if we were beings from another planet. As they stepped forward, the story of the missing revolver came out.

"Revolver?" said my mother, indignantly when asked about it. "What would we poor women do with a revolver? Certainly you may search the flat."

I had been nervous and inclined to tears before but my anxiety now increased a hundredfold. Hidden behind the wide skirting board and the fire grate in the kitchen was an arsenal, collected over the weeks by patriots who looked upon the flat as a secure hiding place for stolen weapons, until they could be taken by

messengers to the forest. A single gun secreted in my mother's blouse, was damning evidence that would have sent us straight to a firing squad; but discovery of the cache would mean horrible torture before the Russians put us out of our misery.

My heart pounded as the soldiers moved from room to room. My mother, pretending eagerness to assist, threw open cupboards and drawers and one of the soldiers put down his rifle to run his hands through the contents, lingering longer than was necessary when Zarins' back was turned in order to feel the texture of our silk underclothes.

From the bedrooms and lounge, we moved at last to the kitchen but by this time, my mother's continued protestations against the whole affair had begun to wear Zarins down. He walked across the room and stood with his back to the fireplace, I dug my nails deeply in the palms of my hands to keep myself from fainting. If he drummed his heels against the skirting board, all was lost, for the rattle of the guns behind it would betray us.

But Zarins was more interested in the coffee pot on the stove. "You are still able to get coffee, madame?" he said meaningly to my mother.

My mother sniffed at the suggestion. She wanted Zarins out of the kitchen immediately at all costs. "A little," she said, "but not enough to go round."

Zarins accepted the rebuff. "This is a strange business," he said, walking slowly to the door. "The whole thing is extremely suspicious and must be reported to higher quarters. I should watch your behaviour carefully. We have heard of you before," he said, turning to me, "I shall have my eye on you for a long time to come. And that goes for the rest of your family, too." One of the soldiers gave me a broad wink as he followed Zarins out of the room and in relief, I almost winked back.

Contact with people who had a standard of living they did not dream existed changed the outlook of many Russian soldiers after a little time as masters of Latvia. Their political commissars had taught them to despise everything that was bourgeois and when the soldiers first came to Latvia, the results were often diverting.

Soon after the Russians took Riga, I was in a queue in a Riga sweetshop behind a young Russian soldier who was astonished that sweets were on sale to the public at all. Later, sweets became very scarce indeed but at that time they were plentiful and the soldier asked somewhat shyly if he could buy a packet.

"Of course," said the shopkeeper, "take two if you like."

The Russian glanced furtively round the shop to see whether he was observed indulging in the *bourgeois* habit of buying sweets. Satisfied that no one was watching, he put two packets in his pocket. "Perhaps a third?" he said. The shopkeeper agreed and the Russian, whose expression showed that he had never seen so many sweets on sale before in his life, fled before the shopkeeper could withdraw his offer or a superior reproved him for buying sweets. (The shopkeeper's expression turned sour, however, when he found he had been paid in roubles.)

In the early days, another thing that surprised the Russians was the fact that butter was on sale in the shops; they could not believe that butter was plentiful in Riga. "It must be margarine," they insisted. "In Russia, only the top party men eat butter."

But although goods of all sorts soon became unobtainable in Riga, contact with another world had already changed both Russian officers and men in a subtle way. In Riga's east end some of the prettiest girls in the entire country lived and worked, and for a time the soldiers reserved their efforts for them. They disdained to notice upper-class girls—they did not know how glad we were to be spared their attentions—although they were not above shouting insulting remarks as we passed along our broad boulevards or sat in the cafés and hotels.

Time altered their outlook and it was not long before both officers and men began to make our lives difficult and unpleasant. They hung about the entrances of flats and houses and without a trace of shyness, boldly asked girls they had never met before to go out to dinner or accompany them to the music halls or cafés.

I watched the development with distaste and could have spat on Latvian girls who fraternised so openly with the enemy but the time came when I saw how valuable it could be for me.

As the Russians tightened their hold on the country,

it was more and more precarious for the underground to operate in Riga. Informers were busy everywhere and it had become too dangerous for guerrillas of military age to show their faces in the streets by day or night. Other methods had to be used. Lieut. Vitols my old friend, had transformed himself into an ancient, odiferous farmer and his friends became unkempt old men, who shuffled through the streets at snail's pace, muttering and cursing to themselves. They were ignored by the Russians and shunned by their countrymen; the sight of two old men—never more, since any Russian soldier had power to disperse more than three people on the streets—sitting on the kerbside or sharing a crust in a dockside café aroused no comment. Under cover of giving such men a coin or a scrap of food when they came begging, I was able to receive orders and carry on with my work as a messenger.

I do not know how dangerous suspicion began to attach itself to me. My father was an army man who had many friends in Government circles and he, and therefore all his family, were automatically suspect by the communists. But that was general suspicion. Once we had survived the first few months of the occupation, suspicion about individuals had to be specially planted in the minds of our new despots and that could be done only by open specific accusations or secret information given by informers.

Intuition is a valuable asset to any underground worker and I was glad I had a measure of it. Without having any special information to go on, I suddenly began to feel that I was under more careful surveillance than most people. It was an uncanny feeling and at first I dismissed it as war weariness or mere jumpiness. But tiny incidents gradually accumulated until I was sure that the NKVD were paying special attention to my movements. Too often when I left the flat, men in ill-fitting blue suits turned their backs on me to light cigarettes and then saunter after me. I would find them still on my heels a mile away—never the same men and they never came too near.

Once, when I set off for the forest, taking a round-about route as usual, I found a podgy, middle-aged man behind me at a distance of about two hundred yards. He kept on my track for so long that eventually I abandoned

my journey and to encourage him in future, I took him on a long detour round the old city before returning home. Since I varied my speed, pedalling furiously part of the time and dawdling the rest, my "shadow" must have had a wearying time.

The battle at the flat ending in Zile's death must have thrown more suspicion on the family, though Zarins did not pursue his enquiries. I was sure too that our caretaker Krumins had instructions, which he would take a delight in following, to keep a careful check on all our movements and to report anything in the least suspicious.

The more I thought of the danger in which I had placed myself, the more I was convinced that I must do something urgently to divert the attention of the communists to other channels. I felt that my liberty, if not my life, was at stake.

I had begun to toy with the only plain solution to my problem—to become friendly with a Russian officer—when I found the answer on my own doorstep. One night, as I walked down the corridor, I was accosted by a good-looking young Russian who wished me good evening and forced me to stop for a chat. He said he had been visiting another Russian billeted in the block. "I have no girl friend to keep me company," he said, affably. "Why not spend the evening with me tomorrow? We will go for dinner to the Hotel Roma and afterwards dance. Yes?"

I had almost decided, as I have said, to strike up a protective friendship with a Russian and this fortuitous meeting made up my mind for me. The man seemed young and presentable. My friends in the Underground would know why I acted in such a reprehensible way and I did not care about the rest. I agreed to meet him outside the block on the following evening.

The Russian was in good spirits when we met and soon I discovered why. Strapped in some way to his wrist, he was wearing a small travelling clock which he had either bought or stolen a short time before. "Good, is it not?" he said, "There are plenty of watches like this in Latvia, yes?"

I blushed with shame that I had chosen such an ignoramus as a companion. "That's a small clock," I said. "You can't wear it on your wrist. It looks simply ridiculous. Pull your *rubeshka* down and cover it up or I will not dine with you."

The Russian sulked for a time but eventually pulled his shirt sleeves as far down as he could and after this *contretemps*, we spent a restrained evening together. In the hotel, I became aware that the few Latvians who were not in the company of Russians or Latvian communists were glaring venomously in my direction and I began to regret bitterly that I was accepting a Russian's hospitality. "Better suspicion than: looks like this," I thought. But when we reached my home at the end of the evening, the Russian pressed me so hard to meet him the following evening that I could not very well refuse.

He came on time—without his travelling clock—and over a drink, he said to me: "Let's go to *saks*, Asja, you and I."

I had never heard the word before. "I don't understand," I replied, "What is *saks*?"

The Russian tried to reach my hand under the table. To "*saks*," he repeated. "We will go so *saks* tomorrow and be married."

I could not believe my ears and looked at him disdainfully. He had drunk one or two vodkas quickly and the carnival spirit was abroad among the Russians in the bar but he was in no way worse for liquor. His suggestion enraged me but I decided that I must handle the situation diplomatically and began to jolly him along. "Marriage?" I said, pulling my hand out of his reach. "How can we be married? Where's the ring?"

The Russian would not be put off. "Ring? We need no ring to marry in Russia. We need no ring here now that Latvia is part of Russia."

He continued to urge me to marry him on the following day and I was thoroughly alarmed at his persistence. "Perhaps the day after," I said, playing for time. "I will see."

The Russian seemed to interpret this as a promise and did not renew the subject until we reached my flat. As I left him in the entrance hall, he pressed my hand ardently to his heart and said; "All right. The day after tomorrow we will go to the *saks*."

My feminine feelings were outraged, not so much by the fact that the Russian lout had asked me to marry him, as by the cold-blooded way he had done it. If he had paid me a compliment or two I should not have felt so hurt and angry. We were total strangers and had

spent only three or four hours in each other's company. We had not kissed and there had been no whisper of love between us—not that there ever could have been love on my part for a Russian. The whole thing was barbaric and indecent.

Nevertheless, I was seriously worried and spent much of my time during the next day wondering how I could escape from my uncooth wooer. I did not want to disappear and, more from prudence than anything, I did not want to ask my friend Lieut. Vitols to liquidate the Russian in case he had told his friends my name. To add more suspicion to the load I bore already would have been rash indeed.

The dilemma was unsolved when I was obliged to keep my next date with the Russian. He did not appear to have smartened himself up for the wedding but he did not bring his clock and he was still burning with his desire to go the *saks*. It was all I could do to hold him off again but egged on, he drank the best part of a bottle of vodka, and forgot the urgency. That night I escaped only after promising that I would go with him on the following day.

I had now avoided the fatal step twice but was doubtful whether I should be lucky a third time. "Go and stay with your friend Berta for a day or two," said my mother, when I told her my troubles. "I don't want a stinking Russian bear round here as a son-in-law."

I took her advice and returned home at the end of the week to hear that the Russian had haunted the block for two or three days before deciding that his "bride" would never turn up. I was thankful to forget the horrible incident, for I knew that the Russian would have dragged me off to the *saks* by force if he could have laid hands on me.

But a week later to my alarm, I met the Russian in the corridor when I was returning home for supper. My fright had now given place to anger at the thought that Latvian girls could be treated in such a way but I was still apprehensive at the rough way he seized me by the arm. "You, Asja," he said grimly, "You didn't keep your promise to go with me to the *saks*. For that, I have a good mind to make your face look like a beef steak."

He let go of me unexpectedly and I reeled against the wall. "But it doesn't matter," he said, "there are plenty

of other girls who are glad to go to the *saks*." He tramped on his way whistling, not knowing that in the jacket pocket of my ski-coat I held a gun, which if he had carried out his threat, I would have used without compunction.

Winter melted into spring and the crisp snow turned into slush and water. To me, winter had always been the best season of the year in Latvia. I loved the crunchy snow underfoot and the crisp air, filling my cheeks with colour and cleansing my brain, was a far better tonic than the finest champagne.

It was the most miserable winter I have ever known. Somehow my mother always managed to scrape together enough money to buy food on the blackmarket and we were able to eat nearly as well as the favoured Latvian workers. But we were still hungry most of the time and the misery all around us drove familiar jests from our lips and fired our hearts with hatred for those who had caused it.

My father had gone out of our lives and we did not know whether he was dead or alive. My mother wept for him but always in the privacy of her bedroom, not in front of us. Occasionally my brother sent word that he was well but like all guerrillas, he reckoned his life was worth no more than a day's purchase at the most and lived on borrowed time. We saw our friends, one after another, disappear, abducted by the invader. Sometimes they turned up in a few days or weeks but when that happened they would never speak of their experience; they shut out most trusted friends from their secrets and were changed men. More often than not however, news that they had been seized was the last we heard of them.

I had always been sad to see winter go, but this year I was glad. The sparkling winter snows had brought no joy but the coming of spring filled us with the new hope that somehow—we did not know or dare to think how—we should find strength or friends to drive the Russians back to their own vast wastes.

But the mirage never became reality. Winter had been indeed a dreary season but as spring wore on, our lives became more and more miserable and in jeopardy.

I had lived for some time with my intuition that when

it suited the convenience of the NKVD, I should be arrested and either tortured or sent to Siberia. Presently, my intuition became a certainty. In carrying out their brutal policies, the NKVD worked to a rigid system. We of the underground never discovered the principles but we did know it was customary to prepare lists of those who were to be taken from their homes. We knew, too, that once the lists were approved, action was swift.

We were all conscious how little we could help the doomed. Sometimes an under-cover worker in a Soviet military office had the luck to see a list and steal it but that did not happen often. The Russians rarely trusted Latvians with matters of such importance until the last moment. Usually, all that a friendly-disposed Latvian could do on the occasions he saw a list, was to memorise a few names and pass them on quickly.

I discovered in a slightly roundabout way that my family was due for "disposal" in the casual, cold-blooded way that cattle are sent to the slaughterhouse. My former girl-friend Alma, whose young husband was now an important Politburo official, was sitting down to dinner one evening when he remarked that he had seen the latest list, which was due for execution at any moment. "You knew that girl Asja, didn't you?" he said, as if discussing a list of the winners of a ski competition. "It's a pity she's blotted her copy-book."

Alma's husband spoke in the past tense and my friend, who was not a communist, was torn all night between loyalty to her husband and friendship for me. Friendship won and Alma hurried to our flat at lunch-time next day to break the news. "You must leave at once, Asja," she said. "I half-expected to find you gone already. All of you must go. The NKVD may come tonight. You know how fast they work."

Alma was so frightened of being seen talking to me that she hurried away before I could thank her. I closed the front door and stood for a moment with my back to it. I had been expecting the news for so long that now it had come, I actually felt relief. Yes, relief. Let the NKVD search for me, I thought. At least I shall *know* I am being hunted and that will be better than this nagging uncertainty of never knowing when the NKVD would knock.

My mother, as usual, was prepared for the emergency

and took the news calmly. She had all our essential clothes and more valuable portable belongings ready to pack into suitcases and had already worked out where we could live for the next few days.

It was an odd fact that Riga's population was swollen by many thousands of invaders yet there was accommodation to spare in the city. The tragic reason of course was that so many families had been deported or shot and their houses had been left just as they were, except that looters had stripped them of everything movable. Billeting did not worry the Russians after the first few weeks. There were plenty of vacant houses they could fill and for the rest, squatters in search of better accommodation or people on the run, such as we had become, moved into houses or flats they fancied. In a city of despair, no one cared.

We crept out of the back entrance of the block unobserved by the lynx-eyed Krumins and were soon established in a deserted house not far from the Latvian Army's old sports ground. The house belonged to an officer of my father's regiment, whose wife had died of sorrow and privation a month or two before. Everything except a few rickety chairs, kitchen tables, old rugs and bric-a-brac had vanished and the garden was over-run by weeds. But it was secluded and here for the first time for months, I was able to relax. Ever since we had raided the Latvian army's armoury after the Russians crossed our border, we had been living literally with a powder barrel under our feet. For a short time it was pleasant to retire from the struggle and know that, if the Russians were bent on arresting us, they would at least find no incriminating evidence around.

But the feeling did not last long. For a few days we lay low, hardly daring to venture out except to stand, drably anonymous, in the long queues for food. As I looked around during these lengthy ordeals, I saw that Riga, which we had been proud to call the Venice of the Baltic, was as shabby as an old camel. The rowdy Russian soldiers gave the streets a veneer of gaiety but the very buildings seemed to brood over the fate that had befallen those who had made her solid and comfortable, yet at the same time, virile and vivacious.

Many Latvians could still rise above their fate and Lieut. Vitols was one. Sitting in the silent house one

afternoon, I had a sudden premonition that all was not well; that I was living in a fool's paradise and that I must see Vitols at once.

The feeling was so strong that I put on my oldest coat, boarded the crowded No. 1 tram in Brivibas Street and made my way to the other end of the town. I felt safe in the mean streets of the dock area because I knew that although the Russians frequented them in force, raids were not common and it was possible to hide merely by joining the crowds. I found Lieut. Vitols near a café he used. He looked old and broken and dirty enough to deceive anybody. Occasionally, he played his part by attempting to beg. I walked towards him and as he did not give me a warning gesture, I approached him with a coin.

He took the money and bowed his thanks to me. Then he said rapidly while his head was still bent: "They are looking everywhere for you, Asja. They know which way you went and will find you unless you move. You must come down here to be safe. No one will find you in this area."

With these words, he shuffled off and I walked away slowly along the dirty streets without looking at him again. Vitols' news did not surprise me—I had expected the Russians to come to our flat after Alma's warning. But when they found I had vanished I did not expect them to search for me. If a patrol picked me up, it was their good fortune. If not, I thought they would take the view that I had slipped through their fingers and that they could not spend too much time looking for one person when so many others were on the lists for arrest.

I accepted Vitols' information without question. It was pointless to worry about what the Russians had discovered to make them want to find me so urgently; pointless too, to speculate on who had given me away. The important thing was to leave the deserted house quickly and stay in hiding in the East End area until the Russians forgot about their search.

My mother had a saying which was often on the tip of her tongue during these terrible times—and later: "If we are to die, let us all die together." As soon as I returned to the house and gave her the news, she declared immediately that we must not separate.

"Well, I don't want to die either alone or with any-

body else," I said. My sister agreed that two women walking the streets were less likely to arouse suspicion than three, who anyway might be shot at by the Russians in their present mood merely for stopping to ask the way. She was determined to stay for a time with a friend who had a flat in the Vermann Park district, and for her own sake, I was glad to see her go.

It was dusk when my mother and I locked the door of the house (I took the key with me in case we wanted to return) and fought our way on to a tram going north towards the old city. Almost everybody had a bundle or bag and we were not conspicuous; dusk was accepted as the time when the migrants who had once been the backbone of the city returned from visiting or foraging before the curfew stopped all movement.

I had no set plans as we skirted the silent Central Market and made our way into Moscow Street, where the crowds were already beginning to thin. "They all have somewhere to go," said my mother with some bitterness, "even if it is only a hovel."

I could understand her feelings but did not feel unduly depressed. In the last few months, I had often slept under the stars and I was certain that it would not be long before we found a cosy corner for the night. Latvia's poorer people had had grievances under President Ulmanis' regime and the Russians had treated them with kid gloves. But they had discovered for themselves the difference between the rule of their own countrymen and that of the foreigner, however well disposed. Already resentment smouldered among ordinary people and the hint of persecution was enough to open many doors.

On this night, however, many people had no desire to go indoors. The air was soft and smelled sweeter outside. In the slum district, the Russians appeared to have kept the curfew in being only for people moving about, and early though it was, doorways had been claimed by people bedding down for the night, with all their possessions stacked around.

But my mother insisted that for this first night as a fugitive she must rest under a roof and I walked up to a woman standing at the door of an old-fashioned wooden house fronting Moscow Street.

"I am sorry, I can give you nothing to eat," said the

woman before I opened my mouth. "We cannot get enough to keep ourselves alive."

I explained that our only wish was for a corner where we might doze until morning. "There must be some good reason why you have no bed," said the woman in a sad, understanding voice. She asked no more questions but beckoned us indoors, where we passed an uneasy night in the creaking house, seated on chairs with our heads cradled on a rough table.

Except for twice Latvians asked no questions while we were on the run. After our first night in the East End, we never knew where we should sleep or whether there would be a welcome for a second night. But our plight was always understood. "It would not be safe for *you* to stay longer, or for *me* to let you," our humble hosts sometimes apologised.

Even in the poorest districts, the Russians kept up some sort of vigilance. But the underground was always active and information about the intentions of the Russians passed around the grim little streets at the speed of lightning. We were always warned when searches were due and knew when it was unwise to linger in a particular district. At the first notice, we quickly gripped our battered suitcases and made for the more genteel suburbs. Or, if we could think of no one on whose space we had not trespassed recently, we edged our way towards the forests and spent a night or two in the open air.

I had left my mother behind to rest on the first occasion I was questioned by a Latvian in the East End. It was in a workman's cafe where I often met Lieut. Vitols to hear news and receive instructions, and other regular users must have belonged to his group, though I did not know any of them.

With a coffee in front of me, I sat unobtrusively in a corner and prepared to wait. Most of the customers were men—rough-looking, labouring men, whose rank, feral smell reminded me forcibly of cowsheds in which I had slept while working as a messenger—but here and there were women from the streets. At a table nearby a party of four or five middle-aged men sat drinking with a woman.

It was not a pleasant place to wait but I was more uneasy than frightened; I did not think that Latvians

would harm me unless they were drunk and in any case I believed that Vitols might be around at any time.

The noise in the café swelled as the drinking proceeded but it did not conceal the growing animosity, expressed in words and looks, towards me from the group at the next table.

Presently, the nearest man leaned over and, putting his unshaven face close to mine, demanded: "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

I was in no mood by this time to be the butt of drunks and whatever the Russians might do, I did not propose to be pushed around by my own countrymen. I replied: "Mind your own business. I am doing the same as you. Drinking. Only I am drinking coffee."

The man turned to his companions. "A pretty *bourgeoise*, slumming, I have no doubt. On the lookout for what she can pick up—men or information."

"So you think," I said, tartly.

But the man was not rebuffed. "Join us in a drink, if you are not too proud to be seen with the likes of us," he said. "Prove that you are one of us."

I had eaten little that day and in my predicament did not feel like swilling *degvins* but I accepted the challenge and moved over to their table. They had ordered the first bottle from the café owner but they had reserves in their pockets and were willing—for whatever reason—to share it with a stranger.

After a few swift tots, pressed on me without ceremony, I caught my questioner looking at me sideways. He probably thought I had had enough to make me talk because, speaking in a confidential voice, he began to question me again. The others had taken their share of the liquor but they seemed to be in on the game and I knew that my answers must be right.

I fenced a little too cleverly for the liking of my companions and the drinks were poured out again as lavishly as before, presumably to make me talk more freely. I did not count how many drinks I swallowed, but with each drink, my brain became more clear.

"Admit it," said the man with the bottle, "you are a *bourgeoise*."

"I live a hundred yards from here," I said non-committally.

"And you work for the Russians," he said.

"I work for nobody."

He forced another large glass into my hand. "Drink," he said. And waiting only for the drink to go down, he said: "We are of the underground. Are you one of us?"

"I am certainly one of you. Am I not drinking with you?"

I shall never know why the fates were kind to me that night and allowed me to remain unmuzzy and on guard all the time. I shall never know whether the men were agents of the Russians or of the underground. But I knew as I sat drinking their fiery liquor that one false answer would have meant at least an assault and probably a bullet.

The hour grew later and the bottles emptier. Still fully alert, I observed Vitols enter the café and look round, screwing up his eyes as if he could not see beyond his nose. His gaze fell on me and my companions but he ignored us and hobbled off to a corner by himself.

I did not know whether he was aware of my ordeal by *degvins* and for a moment, did not care. I was fully occupied avoiding the searching clutches of my questioner and when for a time, he ignored me to quarrel with one of his friends, I slipped quietly out of the stench of the café and walked stealthily back to join my mother.

The second time searching questions were asked was in equally sordid surroundings, though there was no noise, drinking or jollity at all. My mother and I had been warned to move away from an area in the East End where we had stayed for three or four days and we decided that a little fresh air would do us no harm. But as we plodded towards the suburbs, my mother's keen eye spotted a road block ahead. So we turned back and took our chance in another street on the fringe of the East End, which we hoped would be outside the area to be raided.

There was hardly any comfort in the dingy house where we sheltered but the housewife who gave us sanctuary seemed friendly enough. While she was putting her children to bed, I looked around her sitting-room. The paper was peeling from the walls and there were no curtains at the big windows which opened on to a small garden. The only picture was an oleograph of the Virgin Mary; the only furniture a three-legged stool and two chairs that would not have found a place in our summer chalet at

Edinburg. The room had an extraordinary smell which in some way suggested stale carbolic soap but from the state of the greasy floor, the cleaning must have taken place a long time before.

It was growing dark when the housewife returned, grumbling lightly about the difficulty of keeping children in good health and getting them off to sleep. The children seemed to be remarkably quiet and I had heard no sound from them since we entered the house.

For a time we sat in the semi-darkness and my mother chatted amiably with our hostess in the sort of way I had heard her talk to tenants of some of our poorer blocks of flats. My mother had a knack of drawing out people of this sort but I soon became aware that she was making no progress with our hostess. The woman's replies were always brief, often monosyllabic, but her questions were very much to the point.

"You have no light in the house, madam?" my mother asked, moving uneasily in her uncomfortable chair.

"Candles only," said the woman.

My mother was not always as discreet as the times demanded and as she replied to the woman's questions, I soon found myself listening drowsily of stories of better times Latvians had known, including her own family.

All this was harmless enough, poured out to a sympathetic or neutral ear. My mother felt the need to talk and I was too tired and uninterested to join in. Our hostess could not see me clearly in the gloom and I could doze without seeming discourteous.

But my sharpened sense of danger warned me to wake up. Too many questions were being asked, too many damaging answers given. And, more than that. The old house was full of creaks but they were spasmodic and the creaks I was now hearing were regular and continuous. I sat up in my chair with my ears as wide open as those of a startled fox.

"There is someone outside the door, madam," I whispered to our hostess.

My mother stopped talking and the creaking stopped, too. We sat for a moment holding our breath, afraid to move, yet afraid to sit still. At last, I could stand the tension no longer. "Start talking again, mother," I said in a low voice, "just talk rubbish, but talk. Talk now."

My mother began to talk again but the housewife

interrupted. "I will light the candles," she said, "I do not like the darkness."

She struck a match to light a small candle on the mantelpiece under the picture of the Virgin. The light flared into a flame, and for an instant as I rose to my feet, I saw her anxious, careworn, yellow and frightened face. But for an instant only. Before the candle had time to settle down, the door was flung open violently and a fierce-looking man appeared.

He looked swiftly to left and right. Then, taking a stride forward, he dashed out the light with one hand and brushed me aside with the other. I was still recovering from my astonishment when he leaped through the large window and shattering the glass as he went, landed into the garden outside. The tinkling had no sooner subsided than it was followed by the sound of running footsteps.

Seized with panic and hardly daring to move in the darkness, I said: "Who was that? Why was he listening outside the door?"

I heard the housewife scraping a match on the side of the box. "Don't strike that match," I ordered.

The housewife seemed as astonished as we were. I could not see her but I could hear her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. "I don't know. I don't know. It is nothing. Pay no attention to him."

Nothing! Pay no attention! I had become innured to dramatic events and sudden happenings but her answer surprised me more than the man's action. He had listened at the door. He had discovered from my mother's conversation that we had seen better times—we were *bourgeois*. He had burst into the room and in his hurry had jumped through the window. For what?

There could be only one answer and that was not the woman's astonishing: "It is nothing." He had done it to discover who we were and was now doubtless on his way to lay information at the nearest army or police post that two wanted women were sheltering in the house.

I shook my paralysed mother into activity and she responded at once. Snatching up our bags, we hustled into the street without another word. When we were more than a mile away—a few hundred yards from the road block which had caused us to turn back—I found a tool shed at the bottom of the garden of a villa and finding a few old sacks, we made ourselves comfortable until the

morning. Before we slept, I took my mother's hand in mine and together we prayed that we might see another day in Latvia.

The Russians themselves, without realising it, kept the underground supplied with a great deal of information about their intentions but towards the beginning of June, 1941, we began to understand that they did not care what the Latvian underground either knew or did. They were pre-occupied with far bigger issues in which Latvia's place was small.

English speaking patriots, picking up items on short-wave wireless stations hidden in the dock area, spread the news about how the war was going in other parts of the world. We knew that Britain had withstood Hitler's bombardment, that Italy had lost half her fleet and her empire to the British and that Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania and Yugoslavia were swinging uneasily on the Axis.

On the surface, all was sweetness between the Reds and the all-conquering Germans. Announcements were put out frequently that no misunderstandings could wreck their relations and that war between them was unthinkable.

Yet in Latvia, hidden from prying outside eyes, the portents were there for us to see. By the beginning of June, Russia had worked herself into a state of uneasiness. More and more Russian officers, particularly those of the air force, made sudden journeys to Moscow and troop movements in all directions took place incessantly even during daylight. More significantly still to us because they affected us more, were the deportations that had begun on a large scale again.

We had been wrong to think that Russia had done her worst during the first weeks of the occupation. Almost a year after the first dreadful deportations, the lorries once more were speeding through the streets again carrying men, women and children on the first part of the journey to Siberia.

In the spring, three or four lorries sufficed for the night's task but with the coming of June, the number increased. Even the East End was not immune from the nightly visits of the NKVD agents. Sometimes, near houses where we sheltered, scuffles would break out in the

darkness as patrols tried to force people from their homes into the waiting lorries. Often patriots saw a chance to help and gun battles were fought; there was scarcely a night when one or more of my countrymen did not resist to the last as my poor friend Zile had done.

"It all points one way," said a forest guerrilla when I reported the news to him. "The Russians have wind of a German attack. They do not want the Germans to get cheap Latvian labour. That is why deportations have been stepped up."

I could not resist the question. "If the Germans come, shall we be better off?"

The guerrilla's voice laughed but not his eyes. "Asiatic or Hun, it will make little difference to Latvia. The Hun may be better in some ways but the difference will not be so noticeable."

The German attack came early on the morning of June 22 and shortly after day-break, the momentous news was known throughout Riga's East End. We had been sleeping on chairs in the back room of an all-night café with three or four homeless women like ourselves. We were all waiting placidly for the cleaner to bustle us into the main room when a middle-aged man in the blue dungarees of a railway porter burst in noisily.

"There is nothing more to worry about," he said in an accent which fixed him immediately as a native of Daugavpils. "The Germans have attacked. Soon they will have all Latvia and even my beloved Daugavpils will be free."

In Daugavpils Latvian is spoken with an atrocious accent. When I heard him speak, I thought wryly to myself that I would be willing to let anybody have Daugavpils provided I could keep my chair a little longer. But immediately a babble of talk broke out around me and the importance of his statement was brought home.

"The Germans under Von Paulus have attacked."

Without urging by the cleaner we moved to the front room and demanded coffee. From that moment, no one thought of sleep. The streets became alive and when the streets would hold no more, people flowed into the cafés and restaurants. In the East End there was not a single Russian to be seen.

The sun rose and the city was *en fete*. After our long,

unhappy year of bondage, it seemed almost miraculous that before the summer flowers were in bloom, our melancholy spring hopes were fulfilled and that we were to be rid of our Russian masters.

We did not think for a moment that the Germans would have difficulty in over-running the Russians, whose fighting had been done so far against gallant but absurdly armed people. The Germans would come! Berlin-Riga-Leningrad—the route was almost direct.

Yet even if the Germans treated us with kindness, it was no hour of triumph for the Latvians, especially for Latvian families like my own, who had lost fathers and brothers in battle and relatives by deportation.

Exultation spread from the East End to the Old City and the crowds surged forward along Aspasijas Boulevard towards the Castle and past the dominating Latvian Mother monument into the noble Brivibas Boulevard. I wandered about all day savouring the scene, sometimes alone, sometimes when she was not feeling tired, with my mother. The Russians were too busy to worry about Latvians, with the Germans hard on their heels.

In spite of the foreboding in our hearts, it was a time for speaking one's mind and like many others, I was eager to take advantage of it. Walking along Elizabetes Street in the direction of the War Ministry I met a Russian air force major, who had been friendly with Sovorov, the officer billeted on us during the first days of the occupation. The major was getting into his car and the driver held the door open for him. "Surely you are not leaving us, major?" I asked.

He glared at me. "Yes, I am," he grated, "but don't be too cocky, *I shall be back.*"

Lorries loaded with soldiers were pulling out everywhere and at the railway stations officers and men clambered all over the guns that had been piled on to open wagons. Amid the green-grey uniforms were a few women, among whom I saw a girl named Elsa. She like me, had been a messenger, but the strain had been too much for her and she gave up the work. Later, in order to live, she married a Russian.

I never heard that she ever betrayed any of her colleagues and when I saw her set, sad face, I felt sorry that she had chosen voluntarily to go the way that many of

her countrymen had been taken by force. I waved to her and shouted and although she heard, she turned her face deliberately away. Her last thoughts on leaving Latvia must have been very bitter indeed.

Yes, the Russians were going and those who could not find transport went the only way they could—on foot. Long after I thought the last enemy had gone, I encountered a young Russian hurrying along the street. He must in some way have become separated from his unit and was alone, apparently bewildered by the events of the day. On his back was a haversack and tucked under one arm, was a loaf of black bread which he had obviously snatched up to help him on his way.

He can have had no idea of the hatred Latvians nurtured against his race and seemed unaware that he was in any danger from angry patriots.

"Which is the way to Moscow?" he asked pathetically.

I pointed eastwards. "That way," I said, "and its 700 miles."

The German attack on Russia, when all seemed to be going well for them puzzled many Latvians that day but something puzzled us still more. After returning to our old flat and forcibly ejecting a couple who had taken up their quarters there, I went again to the East End to listen for news on the wireless.

The room in the back street house where the set was installed was full and stuffy and Churchill's challenging voice competing with the crackles, did not make sense to me, since my knowledge of English was rudimentary. The voice stopped and the radio was switched off. We waited somewhat impatiently for the man who was interpreting to tell us what Britain's war leader had said.

But the man sat on his chair like a man in a trance, saying nothing and looking vacantly into space. Someone tapped him on the shoulder and asked him: "Well, what did he say?"

The interpreter shook himself as if to be rid of an evil thought. "He said that in view of the attack, Britain must now be considered an ally of Russia," he muttered.

We looked at each other in horror. Britain, on whom we pinned all our hopes of freedom, had come down on the side of our Russian oppressors. We could not believe it—could not believe that the freedom-loving people of

Britain would lift a finger to help the Russians to take away our liberty again. For us, the paramount enemy was Russia. We knew the Nazis were ruthless, land-hungry megalomaniacs who also cared nothing for life or liberty but the Russians were nameless beasts. And the Russians now had Britain for an ally !

Perplexed and downcast, I went home to break the news. "After that, I feel almost like going out and welcoming the Germans," I said.

CHAPTER FIVE *THE GERMANS TURN THE SCREW*

OUR honeymoon with the Germans lasted little more than a month but that was longer than I expected. Their arrival in Riga was an exciting sight. In any event, I think we Rigans would have been deeply impressed by their well-pressed, black uniforms and upright bearing but after the untidy, sallow-looking, unmilitary Russians—I exempt the Russian air force from these remarks—they were almost a welcome sight.

At that moment, we Latvians still left in Riga longed more than anything else for peace and order. We wanted an end to the senseless snatching of people from their homes, the shootings and beatings-up and the harrying to which we had been subjected for so long.

The first Germans I saw were storm-troopers of the S.S. I had taken a tram from Moscow Street to Daugavas Bridge and had walked for ten minutes in Brivibas Boulevard when I met the first contingent. They were in no sense battle-stained and looked so smart that they might have come straight from a parade ground. In their peaked caps were the notorious skull-and-cross-bones badges and as they marched, they sang the stirring words of the Horst Wessel song. It was easy to believe looking at and half-admiring them, that whatever evils were perpetrated in the name of the Reich, the deeds would be done in an orderly fashion.

With my mother and sisters, I spent the first few days of the German occupation scrubbing out the flat, mending furniture and washing curtains. But I kept in close touch with Lieut. Vitols—now shaved, cleaned up and the possessor of a brand-new suit of railway dungarees—who had temporarily left the East End and was moving freely about the city on forged papers. From him, I took my orders for the guerrillas in the forests, who still had to be fed and kept informed, even though our country had changed hands.

"My contacts say we must not co-operate with the Germans, Asja," he said. "They will prove to be as brutal as the Russians once they settle down. In the meantime, we must reorganise while it is still safe to be in the

open. They are certain to clamp down on everything before long."

My friend Vitols was correct. The Germans had a plan for Riga and proceeded to put it into force with precision. The word "*beschlagant*" began to be pasted on the doors and windows of all unoccupied buildings and some that were occupied also. The German administration in "liberating" us had obviously no qualms about requisitioning anything that took their fancy.

The German Governor, Von Rosenberg, said to be a Baltic born Nazi in charge of all the Baltic states, had plans, too, for using local labour. Placards began to appear in the streets ordering everybody below the age of 50 to report to labour exchanges and the command was reinforced verbally by loud-speakers mounted on cars, which drove up and down from dawn to dusk. The Germans did not, apparently, intend to leave anybody with time on their hands.

Even at that early stage, the Germans foresaw there would be heavy casualties on the eastern front. When I reported at the nearest labour exchange, I was directed at once to a desk where particulars were being taken of all with experience of nursing or medical work. "You will go tomorrow to the Hach Clinic in Meza Parks," I was ordered. "We shall be able to find lots of work for useful hands like yours."

The Labour exchange was packed. I did not dream there were so many able-bodied men and women under 50 in the city after the rape of the army and the large scale deportations that had taken place. But the numbers were made up by those who had just emerged from hiding and by guerrillas who were willing after a year's sojourn in the forest to see what living under the Germans was like.

Once I had my own orders, I settled down in a corner to watch the way the Nazis were organising Latvia. Fat and prosperous-looking officials in uniform, who were brisk but not unkindly, sat behind desks marked with such labels as "Register here"; "Do you want work?" and "Do you want to join the army?"

At first nobody at all seemed anxious for "work," and the official there sat twiddling his thumbs, but it soon became obvious that behind the façade of a free choice,

the officials had orders to direct those who reported into one of a strictly limited number of channels.

The young men could join a Latvian S.S. division which was being recruited. Older men and women could volunteer for work either in Latvia for the German administrative machine, if they had the necessary qualifications, or in Germany for munitions making. Women who wished to do neither, were given a third choice: they could work as servants for the German families of officers and officials who were already arriving in flocks.

The Labour exchange was little more than a slave market, conducted in an orderly way!

Saddened by the thought that not only had my poor Latvia been conquered again but that her people had been bound in far stronger chains, I hurried to the flat to find the family celebrating the homecoming of my brother Karl.

I could not blame any of the guerrillas for wanting to leave the forests. They had lived a wretched life for more than a year and knew in their hearts that they were clutching at straws in hoping that the Germans would give them independence as soldiers again. Their leaders had warned them strongly against going to Riga to enlist. "They say it is like putting our heads into a lion's mouth," laughed Karl. "Maybe it is. But if we have to die, it is better to die quickly rather than rot away like old trees in the forest."

Karl's privations had left their mark on him. His cheeks were hollow and his body, which had never been well-covered, was emaciated. But he was the same gay Karl whom we had loved in better days.

Karl had not spent all his time in the forest. When he grew bored he had visited relations in other parts of Latvia and had lived for a time with the family of a girl who had been a nursing sister in the Riga State hospital. More than once he had ventured back to our flat at night and had been soundly berated by my mother for doing so. While he was in the flat he was a constant source of worry because of his habit of leaving his gun behind cushions or under the sofa when he wanted to be more comfortable without it. But he was the youngest of the family, spoilt and affectionate in return, and I could see my mother's eyes filling with tears as she looked at him fondly and thought of the dangers he still faced.

Karl brushed such fears away. "They say the Germans are raising two Baltic divisions to fight the Reds," he said. "Well, we've a lot to pay back, eh? From the number of guerrillas trekking into Riga in the last day or two, I should think there will be no difficulty in filling the ranks from Latvia alone."

The Baltic divisions were formed, given preliminary training in German methods and marched eastwards with enthusiasm to fight the Russians. For a time, the Reds retreated, and everybody was jubilant. But soon, as the Russian resistance stiffened, Latvian and German soldiers began to return, mutilated and in bloody bandages. Great gloom descended on all Latvia again.

My work at the Hach Clinic was light at first. The Clinic before the war had been patronised by wealthy Latvians and was luxuriously built and well-equipped. My introduction to it had been agreeable. When I reported at noon to the doctor in charge, I was greeted affably; he stroked his gleaming head and said, "Ah, yes. I think we shall get on well together. Tomorrow, you will begin work but today, we will have a little party." He rang a bell and summoned an orderly. "Bring in some champagne and call in the other doctors," he ordered.

Before the casualties began to make heavy demands on their time, the doctors were in a relaxed mood and organised many parties. They were not Nazis but professional men doing a job that had taken them all over Europe—France, the Low Countries, Poland and other countries whose liberty had been taken away by Hitler.

If there were informers among the doctors, they did not mind and they were quite open and free in their comments on the Nazis. The general view was that Russia would capitulate in a matter of weeks, a negotiated peace or an onslaught on England would follow and after that, they could all go home and resume their practices. "England," they often said, "always wanted to make war on us. Now she must pay."

Every time they had a few drinks, they thought sentimentally of home, wives and children. It grew a little boring to me and once, unable to bear their maudlin sentiments, I burst out: "I expect *my* father would like to come home too. I wonder if he ever will?"

I came to admire the skill and hard work of the German

doctors but I could never understand, let alone tolerate their attitude to the Jews. The Russians had paid little attention to the Jews as Jews but had given them the same treatment as all other Latvians—no better, no worse. The Nazis, however, brought with them their hateful anti-Semitic ideas. All Jews were compelled to register immediately. It made it easier for the Germans to single them out for special measures later. They were given a yellow arm band, which they were ordered to wear at all times in the streets.

The most active Jews were put to work at once and some became waiters in German officers' messes. Even by the doctors, they were treated harshly, and frequently at parties Jews who were standing about after serving drinks were ordered harshly: "Get out! If you have finished your job, clear off." Sometimes the words were accompanied by blows or kicks.

But parties, lavish and enjoyable though they were for the favoured few, were no more than tiny lights in a great backcloth of misery; the fate of the Jews was only degrees worse than that of many Latvians, whose dignity was affronted constantly.

Materially, drinks and clothing became a little easier to get but food was still scarce and our lives were governed in a series of decrees made by the Germans which were enforced without mercy. The Germans had their Gestapo which was as dreaded as the NKVD had been. The Russians deported; the Germans ordered men and women to make munitions in foreign lands. We who loved our country could see little difference between the two sets of invaders.

What was worse was that there were Latvians who were willing to persecute their fellow-countrymen and prey on them. One, named Sipols, had been a pioneer airman once and had earned notoriety by taking off from a Riga Street. He became a Nazi and was made one of the police chiefs in Riga.

A friend took me to the Riga Police Club during his regime and he did not hide the fact that he was enriching himself at the expense of the Jews. "Look what I took from an old Jew today to allow him to live outside the ghetto," he said gleefully, throwing a handful of jewelry on the table.

"You gave him permission, sir?" asked someone.

"Yes, for one more day," said Sipols, roaring with laughter.

In a short time Sipols had moved into a large house in a fashionable part of Riga and owned a Rolls-Royce car. He became arrogant and dangerous to cross.

I was in the Café Luna one evening with an opera singer Leonitis when Sipols came in, accompanied by two or three high-ranking policemen. He was resplendent in his black uniform with red epaulettes and looked around superciliously for a table.

Leonitis had a sense of humour which was well known in Riga and he had had enough vodka to make him inclined to indulge it. As Sipols followed the manager across the room to a table, he made a buzzing sound like an aeroplane in flight.

Those near our table gave derisive but muted hoots of laughter which Sipols heard. He turned round and fixed the unhappy Leonitis with a glare. "What do you mean by making that offensive noise?" he demanded.

"Nothing, Sipols," said Leonitis, sobering rapidly, "Just a little joke, you know."

"See that this fellow appears in court tomorrow," said Sipols turning to one of his minions.

"And the charge, sir?"

"Ridiculing the police department," said Sipols, stalking to his table.

The charge was heard and the unfortunate Leonitis received a sentence of three months' imprisonment.

With his record for brutality and cupidity, few people had felt like making jokes in Sipols' presence but after the experience of the opera singer, no one was anything but respectful.

From my own point of view, I was glad to be able once more to do work I knew. If the war had not swept over Latvia, I should have been a doctor myself but for the moment, I was content to work in the more humble capacity of nursing sister and so help Latvians wounded in the fighting against Russia.

There was another reason why I welcomed the opportunity to work in the German military hospitals.

Many guerrillas had, like my brother, come out of the forests but many more, distrusting the Nazis as much as the Russians, had stayed behind. They still needed help

and the number of people who could give it was smaller than ever before.

When I told Lieut. Vitols that I had been ordered to report for nursing work, he was pleased. "As soon as the trains with the casualties begin to come in, you will be in a special position to get uniforms and arms from the dead and wounded," he said. "Hospitals are favoured places for food and there will be drugs and medicine to be picked up. No one," he concluded, "will be more valuable to the underground than you—even if it means that you no longer have time to go to the forests yourself as a messenger."

As things turned out, I was able to do all that Vitols had foreseen and carry on with my old work as well. The Hach Clinic was an easy cycle ride from home and the shift system worked at the Clinic meant that I could vary the times of my journeys to the forest. The German doctors were so glad to have skilled help that they went to great lengths to make things easy for me.

"For the time being, I will put you on a voluntary basis," said the doctor in charge when I complained of the strain of putting in eight hours at a stretch at the Clinic, "So long as you come for three hours a day, no questions will be asked."

But that was before the casualties mounted and presently I was working more than 16 hours a day in Riga and other hospitals nearer the front line.

Fate dealt another hard blow to a member of my family in the early days of the German occupation. When I arrived home after a day at the clinic, I found my mother doing her best to console my sister Astrida, who was weeping as if her heart had been broken. Calming her down, I managed to find out why she was so upset. Astrida, the younger sister, had married a violinist named Osoka, who was less successful and earned his living playing in a night club. The family had not approved of the match and considered that Astrida had married beneath her but Osoka was harmless enough and was interested in nothing more than Astrida and playing his violin.

Osoka had not returned home from the club at his usual time and when Astrida made enquiries about him, the truth came out. S.D. men—Latvian security police

trained in Gestapo methods and not at all averse to ill-treating and torturing their fellow-countrymen—had taken him off in the middle of a performance. Nobody had had the courage either to protest or tell Astrida what had happened until she made enquiries. In despair, Astrida had rushed home to mother and had been prostrate all day long.

"Let us go round to the police station and find out why he has been arrested," I said. "It may be nothing to get upset about."

At the police station, we were received in a hostile manner by an S.D. Latvian who was full of his own importance. "He has been arrested. That is all the information I can give you," said the man.

"But what has my husband done?" pleaded my sister, weeping. "He has harmed no one. He is a violinist, nothing else."

"I cannot discuss the case with you but we know all about him," was the unhelpful answer.

My sister continued to protest that her husband was a sick man and because of his ulcers could eat nothing but white meat. How could she be sure that his health was being looked after? The S.D. man smiled contemptuously as much as to say that poor Osoka's diet would be more spartan in future. But after further pleading, my sister obtained permission, as a special concession, to send him a food parcel consisting of a kilo of black bread, cut into cubes which had been toasted so that no message or other material matter could be sent.

A few days later, a brief letter was handed to my sister at the police station, confirming that Osoka had received the meagre parcel and that he was well. The postmark on the envelope made me shudder: the letter had been written from Belsen.

I said nothing to my sister, who, not being in the underground, had little knowledge of Nazi methods. She was informed that she could send a similar parcel the following month and went away contented enough. But that day at the hospital, I remarked casually to the doctor with whom I was working: "Isn't Belsen a concentration camp?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes, one of the worst. But don't worry. We won't let them send you to Belsen whatever you have done."

My sister had not long to wait for the last news she had from her husband. The second food parcel she sent to Osoka came back with a brief note from the commandant which read: "I am sorry to inform you that your husband has died."

Nothing more. Perhaps it was as well that my sister never knew what he suffered before he died. Osoka was one of countless thousands who were done to death by the Nazis. I had not been particularly friendly towards him but the manner of his death made me more determined than ever to wage my own private war against a people capable of such murderous acts against innocent and powerless men and women.

Osoka's tragedy took only a few weeks to run its course. Some of our friends and neighbours when they heard of it, thought that the sincerest sympathy they could offer was to say that he could at any rate neither suffer himself nor be made to endure the sight of others suffering. Our feelings were not so blunted that we could not be moved to compassion by the fate of others but in the jungle into which we had been thrown willy-nilly, there was more concern for the living than the dead.

In Riga, the world did not divide itself comfortably into the living and the dead. There was a third class—the hunted, who were not dead, nor truly alive. The Latvian underground provided some of them, for the men who had fought the despotism of the Russians with little more than their courage and wits, now turned their cold fury on the Germans. Their ranks were swollen by the guerrillas from the forests, some of whom changed their minds about fighting for the Germans when they were half-way to the recruiting offices and were now living in cellars and unoccupied houses as an alternative to returning to the forests.

So many inhabited this half-world that I grew to suspect that every man I encountered out of uniform was a deserter. Almost a year after the death of Osoka, my sister became friendly with a German soldier. I met them together in the town and at her flat, and in a perfunctory way, I became curious about him. Something was just not right. "Your boy friend seems to be hanging about a long time," I said to her one day. "Oh, he's on long leave," was the answer. But as time wore on, my sister could not keep up the deception. "He is a deserter," she

confessed one day. Later, the soldier was caught and we heard he was shot.

There were Russians too among their numbers. They had deserted in the hope of a better life under the Germans but before they came out of hiding to give themselves up, saw how abominably the Germans treated their prisoners. It was too late to repent and they lived as best they could until the Gestapo rounded them up.

I had scant sympathy with Russian deserters, one of whom I met in a curious way. Walking along a busy street one day, I came face to face with old Orlov, a white Russian nobleman who had fled from Russia after the Bolsheviks rose to power and had since earned a modest living by acting as the door-keeper of a night-club I sometimes visited in Kalku Street.

The old man was a philosopher and in the old days, I had had many a good laugh with him about his changed fortune. I had not seen him since the Russians invaded us and certainly did not expect that he would have lived through it all. "Oh, I am indestructible," the old man laughed.

We stood on the pavement and chatted in Russian for some time about our mutual experiences and presently we said good-bye.

A few minutes later I had a familiar feeling that I was being followed and when I reached a quieter part of the city, the feeling was confirmed. A young man dressed in some sort of German uniform caught up with me and asked permission to speak.

"Why do you, a German, speak to me in Russian?" I asked, suspecting that the young man was trying to scrape up a friendship.

I continued to walk and we reached a part of the street that was entirely deserted. "I am not a German," he said, earnestly. "Look, my head is not German-shaped. I am a Russian."

He did not look like a German in spite of his uniform but I did not believe him. "I heard you speaking Russian to the old man," he said, "that is why I am speaking to you now. You must believe me. I am a deserter but I dare not give myself up. The Germans will torture me because they will say I am a saboteur, left behind specially by the Russians." If the young man were speaking the truth, he deserved some sympathy.

He now embarrassed me by falling on his knees and putting his hands together as if in prayer. "Please let me go with you," he said. "I cannot speak a word of German or of Latvian. Please teach me a few words of Latvian and I will not trouble you again."

I told him roughly to get on his feet and said I would think the matter over. If I decided to help, I would meet him at the Art Museum on the following day. I walked home slowly, wondering what I should do; in the night, I woke up several times and was conscious at once that the problem had not been solved. I had no intention of hiding him in the flat—that was asking too much—but I turned over again and again in my mind whether it could do harm to give him a few lessons in Latvian in a quiet spot, so that he could at least fend for himself.

In the end, I hardened my heart and decided to do nothing. The Germans were as clever as the Russians had been in planting *agents provocateurs*. It was possible that the young man had thought up his plan on the spur of the moment on hearing Russian spoken. If I met him, I might become deeply involved in a German plot and at worst, I could be arrested for aiding a deserter.

Deliberately, I shut out all thoughts of the man and justified my action by remembering that there were far more cases worthy of help.

Almost every day, Lieut. Vitols and others of the underground passed on men to me with the request that they should be hidden and provided with clothes or uniforms. Usually this caused little difficulty. The underground had a good supply of the official "white tickets" that were issued to men who were disabled in some way but could still be employed on the railways and in similar types of work, and there were plenty of women in Riga willing to run up the rough blue uniforms the men wore.

But the Nazis waged unrelenting war against men of the half-world. Alsatian dogs were sent to search the cellars of houses and flats, and once I saw two terrified men flushed from the cellar of our own block. Although an underground worker, I had played no part in putting them there and had no idea who had done so. The men must have been on the run for a considerable time for their faces had the pallor that comes from continued living in darkness. The right arm of one of the men was

bleeding badly where he had been savaged by a snarling animal.

Fortunately I was in my nursing uniform and brushed one of the Latvian S.D. men on one side. "Hold those dogs back," I snapped at him. "Do you want him to bleed to death?" In spite of my aggressive attack, I was relieved when the Nazi in charge called his dogs to heel and allowed me to put a tourniquet on the man's arm.

The Gestapo, ably aided by the Latvian traitors who had joined the S.D., employed the same technique as the NKVD had done and often cordoned off streets while they conducted searches for men on the run. All who could not prove their identity were put into lorries and taken away.

But we, too, became adept at deflecting their attentions. Men given shelter in our flat always had their "papers" strictly in order. "Who is this?" an interrogator would ask, turning to me, "Your husband?"

"No, he's my brother. I have no husband." And lowering my eyes demurely, I would say, "I am just an old maid."

The Nazis, no less than the Reds, were susceptible to a pretty face and the whole atmosphere would undergo a change. The Nazis were usually pleased to show how gallant they could be. "Oh, we'll soon find a nice German husband for you!" they said.

Although it went against the grain and often I could barely hide my hatred, I was willing to indulge in this sort of by-play if it gave men on the run a better chance to escape suspicion.

At one time, it seemed that all the men hiding in Riga were my "brothers," and I found them on occasions as difficult as only brothers can be. The care of two young men hiding in an empty flat in the dock area was entrusted to me by Lieut. Vitols who warned me that they were in a difficult mood. Sometimes they reproached me because I was late in bringing their food and I had to be firm with them. "I have my work at the hospital, I go to the forest and I have other things to do as well," I reminded them.

They chafed against confinement but it was too dangerous for them to go into the streets and they had to put up with it. Finally they said they were prepared to join one of the Latvian divisions and I must help them.

"I will see what I can do," I replied, "but it will be difficult. You are deserters and it is many months past the time for joining up. You may get into very serious trouble."

Luckily for the young men, I was acquainted with a Captain Schneider who was in charge of a recruiting office at the heavy artillery barracks. I bluffed my way into Schneider's office. "My brother and his friend are in hiding and wish to join up. Can you stretch a point and let them come in. You know who my father is," I said, giving his name.

Schneider was not keen to do as I asked because he was supervised by Nazis and the appearance of two new recruits would take some explaining. "Let me have uniforms for them," I urged.

Schneider shook his head violently. "I can't do that," he said.

"Then give me a document," I pleaded, "otherwise they will be arrested on the way here and you know what that will mean."

Reluctantly, Schneider wrote out two passes in the names of my brother and another that I gave on the spur of the moment. When the young men saw the passes they could not make up their minds whether to use them and I did not think it was any part of my duty to try to persuade them. But next day they said they would go. "But only if you will go with us, Asja."

I saw there was nothing else for it and taking them both by the hand, led them into Captain Schneider's presence. "Here is my brother," I said, pushing the trembling man forward, "and this is his friend."

Schneider looked at my "brother" with twinkling eyes. "All I can say is that he resembles neither your father nor you," he commented.

The object of the Reds had been to Russianise the Baltic states completely and one of the steps they had taken was to burn our books and forbid any expression of nationalistic sentiment. The Germans went still further and set out systematically to eliminate the use of Lettish. In the streets and shops, Latvian notices were replaced by German and the use of the Latvian language was frowned on.

In a tram, a remark I made to my mother in Latvian

was overheard by a sword-scarred, fierce-looking Nazi. "*Lettische kretze*" (Latvian scabies) he roared in a loud voice. "If we hear much more of this Lettish, we shall compel you Latvians to wear special arm-bands, like the Jews."

Though we were humiliated constantly in this fashion and felt the insults deeply, our main day-to-day pre-occupation was food. At the hospital I ate well enough but most other Latvians who were not in a favoured position had a hard struggle to keep alive, despite frequent trips into the country in search of food that farmers could sometimes sell.

My mother had managed to keep a stock of cigars and cigarettes hidden at the flat and they had always been missed whenever our home was searched. The hoard represented real currency since black-marketeers, of whom there were many, were always eager to exchange food for them.

Ozols, a well-known black-marketeer, approached me one day and said he had heard that we had a stock of cigarettes to sell. "How would you like to do a deal?" he said, "I can get you a pig in return for cigarettes and a little cash as well."

A pig! An unheard-of luxury. Ozols named an astronomical number of cigarettes but the thought of a whole pig kept me talking to him when I should have turned away in disgust. A pig would keep our friends and relations in meat for months and there would be plenty to take to the forest as well. "I think I can put my hands on the cigarettes," I said. "Bring the pig to the flat and we will do a deal."

Ozols promised to bring the pig on the following evening. The winter had set in and it was snowing heavily. "Bring the pig on a sledge," I said when Ozols raised difficulties about transport. "You can cover it up with logs and no one will know that you have it." This was quite true. There was no motor transport for Latvians but the streets were always full of sledges on which people carried furniture and other belongings to barter for food.

The more I thought of the pig, the more I was determined to have it—but not at the price Ozols demanded. The man to help in a little plot I had hatched was my friend Lieut. Vitols.

"Excellent," beamed Vitols, when I explained what

I had in mind, "We have just the uniform needed for the job. Last night, we found a drunken Nazi in the street, carried him to a cellar and stripped him down to his underpants."

Ozols did even better than I suggested. He arrived with a large sideboard, the doors of which had been screwed fast and when we had struggled up the stairs with it, we found the pig, neatly dressed, inside. Ozols wiped his greasy forehead with his handkerchief. "Now for the cigarettes and money," he panted, "I don't want to be seen hanging around here too long."

My mother was already at her desk counting out money and cigarettes in payment and we gathered round the sideboard, looking at the pig which we had already in our minds cut up and cooked. I could even smell the crackling and imagined a large chop on my plate.

The proceedings were brought to an abrupt halt by a loud knock on the door.

"Who is that?" asked Ozols, jumping up. "Who else knows about this?"

I waved him into his chair.

"A neighbour, perhaps," I said. "We will soon get rid of her."

I stood between Ozols and the sideboard and pretended to close the cupboard door while my sister answered the knock. But no sooner had she done so than she was hurled on one side and Lieut. Vitols in the uniform of a Gestapo officer, stood in the room. "Heil Hitler," he said in a loud voice. Ozols jumped up again and I let the cupboard door swing open.

Lieut. Vitols played his part to perfection. For nearly a minute he gazed at the pig, as if the sight of it mesmerised him. Then he looked at Ozols for nearly the same length of time. My sister, to whom I had said nothing of the plot, began to weep quietly in the background.

"A pig," said Vitols at last, as if he had seen a miracle and was unable to believe his eyes, "How do you," he turned to Ozols, "how do you come by a pig when there is not enough meat in Riga for Germans to eat, let alone Latvians?"

Ozols was pale with fright. "You have a pig to sell," continued Vitols, "while our good soldiers of the Reich are starving in the snow on the eastern front. No

doubt they would like a hearty meal of pork. You know," he demanded, "what the penalty is for dealing in black-market meat? Give me your papers."

The black marketeer could not find words to answer as Vitols copied down Ozols' particulars in his notebook. He threw Ozols his papers back and bent over the pig again. "I cannot blame you for buying a pig," he said to my mother. "What price did this infamous rogue ask you for it?"

My mother named the price and Vitols brought his fist down with a crash that shook the sideboard and the pig. "Fifty times its true value," he said, to the shivering Ozols. "No wonder you black marketeers grow fat!"

There was silence—except for my sister's weeping—as Vitols walked round the room, pretending to consider what to do, and slapping his revolver as he walked. "I should take you to headquarters at once to get your deserts," he said to the cowering Ozols, "but . . . I, too, am fond of pork." He paused again. "I have a better plan which will do justice all round. Pay him," he said to my mother, naming a fiftieth of the price that had been agreed upon.

Ozols took the money and cigarettes and I could see that he was torn between anguish that the thought of his lost profit and thankfulness at his escape. "For myself, I will take a leg and forget that I have seen anything of this disgraceful transaction," said Vitols.

He turned to Ozols. "Get out," he shouted, "and if I ever see your face again, it will be so much the worse for you. We have ways of dealing with fellows of your stamp."

Ozols scurried to the door and Vitols turned to me with a large wink. "Now, I will discuss my business with you as soon as we are alone."

If Ozols could have observed the scene ten seconds after he had run out of the flat, he would have had a stroke. Lieut. Vitols grabbed me round the waist and we did a little jig round the pig in the sideboard while my mother sat at her desk and laughed so helplessly that she sent piles of money and cigarettes scattering in all directions. My sister wiped her eyes and seemed agrieved that she had missed most of the fun. "Why didn't you tell me?" she said, plaintively, "I might have enjoyed the joke as well."

We cut up the pig and made plans for taking most of it to the guerrillas in the forest. Vitols left the flat in great spirits, with a leg of pork tucked under his arm. He was well satisfied with his reward for a performance he had thoroughly enjoyed.

But the following evening, when I returned from the Clinic, I found Ozols stamping the snow at the entrance to the flats, waiting for me to return. He looked sour and caught me by the arm.

"We had a narrow escape last night," he said, putting his ugly face within an inch of mine. "Your Gestapo friend arrived at a most inconvenient moment. But he is not here now. I will take the balance of what you owe me."

I shook off his arm indignantly. "What I owe you?" I said. "I owe you nothing, Ozols."

The black marketeer ignored my remark. "I will come upstairs and collect the rest of the money and the cigarettes," he snapped.

I was tired and in no mood to haggle with Ozols. "Listen Ozols," I said, slowly, "my Gestapo friend, as you call him, came to give me special instructions about a Gestapo chief I am to nurse. He is coming again tonight. Would you like me to tell him that you have been worrying me?"

I thought for a second that Ozols' greed would get the upper hand of his discretion and that he would strike me in the face. But I was wrong. He let go of my arm and with a noise that sounded like the snarl of an angry animal, trudged off in the snow.

It was one thing to outwit a racketeer like Ozols but we who were dedicated to circumventing the mighty German machine had to admit that our efforts paid small dividends in comparison with the dangers we ran—a life saved here and there, a few arms, uniforms and documents stolen, and the succour we were able to bring to the hunted in the city and the forests.

There was little we could do for the Jews who as usual, were the first to feel the Nazi lash after an occupation. As soon as the Nazis had settled down, which did not take long, the Jews were dealt with according to a prescribed formula. A ghetto was organised in the East End and when barbed wire had enclosed it, the Jews were rounded

up and compelled to live there. Many of them came from comfortable homes but they were moved into slum hovels without regard for age or health. Their flats and houses were requisitioned as a matter of course and their valuables and money were stolen by those who compelled them to move.

The distress of some of the Jewish families was pitiful to see. My Jewish dressmaker belonged to a large family, which included a grandmother and a child. I called at her establishment at the time of the round-up and found everyone in tears.

"Oh, please can you help us, Miss Asja," implored the grandmother. She was nursing the child and brought her over for me to see. "She doesn't look Jewish, does she?" she said. The child, like many Jewish children, was like a doll with blue eyes and golden hair and I had to admit that she did not.

"Take her. Adopt her. It will keep her out of the ghetto where they say we have all to go. Look," the old woman put the child down and picked up a large bag jingling with money and jewellery, "all this is yours if you will take the child," she said.

I was deeply moved but I had to tell her that what she asked was impossible.

People who were half Jewish were not subject to the same restrictions and on several occasions I went before a Nazi official and swore that I had known the mother of a Jewish friend to be Latvian and non-Jewish. I always went in my uniform of a German nursing sister and as I was as blonde as most *frauleins* and my accent was perfect, my testimony was accepted as that of a Latvian German.

But for the main body of Jews—a great many of the population of Riga were Jewish before the occupation—there was no escape. One of the most melancholy sights I saw in Riga was on a snowy winter morning about eight o'clock. A small crowd began to form inside the ghetto wire and several Nazis strutted about outside, carrying whips. "What is happening?" I asked a bystander.

"It's the Jewish morning work parade," he said.

As the hour struck, the Nazis opened the gate and a party of more than 100 Jews shambled out into the roadway. There were women of over 60 dressed in shabby

fur coats, whose fat legs allowed them to waddle rather than walk and there were young girls, thin as a wisp of smoke, whose naturally dark eyes were darker still from suffering, hunger and shame. Among the men were bearded rabbis in broad-brimmed hats who hunched their shoulders to keep out the bitter cold.

"Get into your groups," shouted the n.c.o. in charge of the party. He and his companions pushed the pathetic Jews into a ragged sort of line and the order was given to march.

The pace was that of the slowest but the slowest was prodded into some sort of speed and the strange, tragic procession marched through the snow on their way to work for German families. As they reached the old town, a few fell out at each street intersection and shambled off to their destinations.

In the evening the process was repeated in reverse, though by then not all the Jews were empty-handed. Some carried a little fish or bread which had been given to them as wages and no doubt they were thankful for such small mercies. How otherwise they would have fared for food. I do not know and the Germans seemed neither to know or care.

THE easy victory the Germans had expected over the Russians did not come, once the momentum of their advance had been checked. The Russians dug themselves in, retreated and surged forward again; the story of the long and bloody struggle that swung backward and forward across the vast spaces of Russia has been written into every history of the Second World War.

We in the medical services in Latvia were called on to patch up many of the bodies that were broken and mutilated in the gigantic struggle on Germany's eastern front. The Germans, all through the campaign, constantly boasted of their successes but in the casualty receiving wards doctors and nurses knew that if victories had been won the cost was terrible.

From the easy routine of the Hach Clinic, I moved to the Riga military hospital and later on, as the Germans retreated, to various field hospitals near the Russian border. The time for parties was past. The work was hard and the hours long; as a rule, nursing sisters were on duty for 24 hours at a stretch and were allowed only a day in which to recuperate before going back to work again. Into our wards came many of the wounded men of the Baltic divisions. So, while I was ordered to help to nurse Germans, I was able also to help my own countrymen, who had been wounded fighting against the hated Russians.

Nursing, did I say? For long stretches at a time, I did precious little nursing. Because of my previous medical experience, I often passed my days in the hospital theatre, helping German surgeons to amputate limbs that had grown gangrenous or were black from frost bite. When the hospital trains came in, it was not uncommon to spend an entire 24 hour duty in the theatre.

On such occasions, our regular orderlies were run off their feet and we were compelled to make use of Russian prisoners to clean up the theatre and even assist at actual operations.

An orderly named Kuznecov once gave us all a fright

in the theatre. A German officer was brought in with a badly shattered leg. Gangrene had set in and was spreading rapidly and it was imperative to operate without delay. We saw the officer at the end of a long day, and as I could not find a German orderly, I called in the Russian we usually employed emptying the slops and doing other menial jobs. Kuznecov, a town-bred Russian, looked as if he would be more at home sitting over a chess board, and he did not relish the task. I told him to take hold firmly of the officer's leg and at once busied myself with the instruments while the surgeon began to cut off the limb.

Kuznecov was so shocked that he did not know—he did not want to know—exactly what the surgeon was doing. All through the operation, he steadfastly kept his eyes averted from the gory scene. He pulled resolutely on the leg to keep it straight and when the surgeon cut through the last strand of skin, Kuznecov fell backwards with the leg in his hand.

I do not know whether he thought he had pulled off the leg by himself. But as he lay on his back among the swabs and realised that he held a human leg in his hand, he let out a scream that caused even the man under the anaesthetic to stir. The doctor and I were too busy completing the operation to take much notice of Kuznecov and left him where he was. Presently, he recovered. He leaped to his feet, and casting the leg into a corner of the theatre, ran out, shouting like a man possessed. We did not call on Kuznecov again for theatre duties.

But however arduous and grim the work, I never allowed myself to forget my real purpose in helping at all in German hospitals. Not long after I transferred to the military hospital, I received a visit from a middle-aged man named Balodis, who was reputed to be the head of the underground in Riga.

I had heard from Vitols about this soft-spoken former detective; he was tough and his hatred of all invaders was masked by a diffidence that might have become a professor or a priest. But his actions were inspired by the supreme motive that Latvia must be free. Lieut. Vitols told me that Balodis had one day said a thing he always remembered. A few disheartened members of the underground had been grumbling that their work seemed

pointless and that although they were risking their lives, they were powerless to stop fighting on Latvian soil.

Balodis had listened quietly for a time and had settled the arguments by one remark. "I don't care how long they fight over our country," he said. "They may reduce it to rubble and we may not be able to prevent it. But one day the invaders will go and so long as there are any stones left, we shall re-build Latvia."

Balodis asked me to ride out with him, mentioning the name of Lieut. Vitols as a password. We cycled to the suburbs and dismounted when we came to open country. "Let us leave our bicycles here," he said, and lifted our machines behind a hedge.

We walked slowly across the field and Balodis sniffed the air appreciatively. "I like the fresh air," he said, smiling, "but best of all, I like to feel that here, nobody can overhear what we are saying."

We strolled about the countryside and to the music of the birds, Balodis explained exactly how I fitted in with his plans for greater underground activity. There were many tit-bits of information that I could pick up from doctors, who often knew of detailed military plans but did not always appreciate their importance. "Keep your ears open all the time, Asja," he counselled.

But more important still was the work of helping wounded Latvian soldiers to escape to the forests again. "The Baltic divisions are being used to do the Nazis' dirty work," said Balodis. "Our casualties have been terrible. The Nazis have played a confidence trick on us and now our main work is to help those who return from the eastern front to escape. Far better for them an uncertain life in the forests than certain death on the eastern front."

I knew that what Balodis was saying was true. Whenever I had a moment to spare at the hospital I talked to Latvian soldiers about their life in the Baltic divisions. They had been in the thick of the fighting and it was all too clear to the most ignorant soldier that the Nazis regarded them as expendable.

Balodis' purpose in talking to me was to warn me that more and more Latvian soldiers would depend on *my* help for their freedom in the future. Already I had been able to do a great deal. Soldiers were arriving at the hospital direct from the battlefield casualty stations with

their arms still intact. The orderlies automatically stripped the dead and dying soldiers of all valuables but I was interested only in guns and ammunition. It was easy for me to slip a revolver or pouch of ammunition into my pocket and just as easy to smuggle it out of the hospital or hand it to a patriot who was ready for convalescence. The guards at the hospital were lax. I had access to all the records and as soon as a Latvian was booked for discharge, I warned both the Latvian and Balodis. The one escaped, often with a gun I had provided; the other arranged for a hide-out and clothes until a place was found for the soldier with a guerrilla band operating in the forests.

Snow was lying thickly on the ground when my brother Karl returned to Riga in a hospital train. He was more fortunate than many of our patients. Shrapnel had laid open his stomach but the wound was not deep and in a few weeks, he was on his feet again.

Before he came to Riga, I had made a trip some miles from the city to visit him in a temporary hospital. The conditions were appalling. The wounded had only straw to sleep on and both treatment and sanitary facilities were primitive in the extreme.

In Riga, I saw Karl often and as the time drew near for him to leave hospital, I found him determined never to go back to fight for the Nazis.

"It is sheer murder," he said, though without self-pity. "Very few have survived from our division. They will soon be back raising new troops but I shall not be one of them."

Karl took his *urlaub schein* or leave pass and returned to our flat. For a few weeks when it had expired, I was able to persuade a friendly German doctor to extend the date. "It is for my brother," I explained.

The doctor laughed. He was strongly anti-Nazi and made no secret of his wish to see the war end. "I don't blame you for wanting to keep your boy-friend away from the front for a little longer," he said.

But I could not rely on the doctor's good nature indefinitely, and Karl, now fit and more determined than ever to desert, disappeared from the flat to a hide-out arranged by Balodis.

I expect he was careless or foolhardy—Karl always was. For a time, Balodis gave us news about him but he

could not keep up with Karl's movements. Then a fortnight's silence was broken. "Your brother has been caught," said the underground leader, meeting me one day.

It was another cross for my mother to bear and at her bidding, I set out to discover for myself what had happened to him. At the Romas Pagrabs Hotel, I met a young Latvian who in the old days had often attended parties at my parents' home but was now a member of the despised S.D. Bebris had hated the Russians and when the Germans came, had been one of the first of their converts.

I think his conversion had been half-hearted and was due to a desire for rapid promotion. After three months at the S.D. school in Berlin, he had returned to Riga as a lieutenant and with such a rank was in a position to know what was happening to people on the run. He seemed to bear them little animosity. He had been educated at Riga's university and was an intelligent man; I was quite sure that already he was disillusioned by the acts of his new masters and would not resent questions. "Deserters?" he said, over a drink. "Oh, we hold them in a requisitioned house opposite the Prefektura. Latvians, Poles, they're all mixed up together."

I asked what would happen to them. "They will be shot, I suppose?" I said.

Bebris laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "Why waste bullets? Many of them are good chaps. They are excellent fighters. They will be sent to the front again. Before the Russians kill them, they may account for quite a few Russians. So why should the Germans kill them?"

I asked Bebris when the deserters were due to be moved from the requisitioned house, thinking that Balodis and his friends might stage a spectacular rescue. "Oh, when we have a batch big enough to deal with," said the S.D. man, without concern. "As a matter of fact, I think a bunch of them are being taken away tomorrow."

I did not waste much further time on Bebris once I had the information I needed and hurried away to contact Balodis. But he was not to be found in his usual haunts and late that night, I went home without plans and without much hope of being able to help my brother.

Bebris had said that the transfer of deserters from the

requisitioned house to army barracks took place about ten o'clock in the morning but long before that time, my sister and I stood patiently near the entrance of the drive. We did not know how the transfer would take place—whether by lorries or on foot—but on the chance that we should see Karl I had made up a small parcel containing food and cigarettes.

As I waited I thought that it was pitifully small and regretted that I had not foraged for more.

Ten o'clock came and still we waited, watching the guards, yet trying to make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible.

Eleven o'clock. Twelve o'clock. The minutes slipped by slowly and still there was no sign of any movement in the grounds of the house. It was a warm, fine day and I imagined as I scanned the crowds hurrying along the streets that the people seemed more cheerful because of the sunshine. Poor Karl, I said to myself. He will come into the sunshine—if he does come—and know that its warmth is not for him but for those whose days are not numbered. I could not bear the thought and felt the urge to run away so as not to witness his misery.

"We will wait a little longer," said my sister Berta, as if sensing what was in my mind. "They may come in a few more minutes."

No sooner had she spoken than I noticed an increase of activity inside the grounds. The guards were lining up and from inside the large old mansion, came the sound of men stirring and roughly-shouted orders.

When the last of the deserters had emerged into the road, and I was able to count them, I should say they numbered more than 100. They bore themselves proudly, although they were a motley lot. Not a single man had a complete uniform. Some looked as if they had slept in their clothes for months on end and others wore tunics, the badges and buttons of which had been ripped off by force. Here and there a bandaged head showed under a cap. Hardly a man had shaved and not one was more than twenty-five.

Yet, unkempt, dirty, shabby though they were, they did not look like a rabble. Their shoulders were squared, their heads held high and they looked with silent contempt at the S.D. men who, with their whips, walked with the Germans as guards.

I scanned the ranks and could not see Karl. "Perhaps he has not been captured, after all," I said.

The deserters were so hedged in by guards that we had to run up and down to make sure of seeing everyone but we knew that if Karl was in the file, we could not miss his tall figure and yellow hair. At last I saw him. He was as pale and dishevelled as the rest and a thick, golden stubble on his chin gave him a rakish look.

"Karl," I shouted.

He turned his head in my direction and for the first time I saw that one side of his face was discoloured from what could only have been the effect of a savage blow. The smile he gave me must have hurt but he waved his hand cheerily.

At that moment, the Latvian S.D. man nearest him noticed the commotion.

"Look to your front," he barked, and brought his whip down heavily on my brother's shoulders.

Karl was a prisoner inside the ranks and could do nothing to protect himself. But I was outside and still free. I knew that protests would be futile. I did not stop to think what I was doing but flew at the brutal S.D. man and gave him a smack on the face that sent him reeling among the prisoners. "Take that, you Latvian dog," I screamed at him.

On this occasion, Germans had more sense and humanity than Latvians. In the ordinary way my action would have resulted in immediate arrest or a blow with the butt end of a rifle at least.

But a crowd was gathering and angry murmuring from the relatives and friends of the unhappy deserters warned our masters not to be too provocative. If a riot took place some of the deserters would escape, even though some would be shot down. The Germans did not want a riot. The officer in charge shouted to the Latvian to take up his place again. My brother turned and I saw a smile on his face. "Don't worry, Asja," he called to me, "I shall be all right."

The part of the procession I had disorganised was about to go on its way when I remembered that I had brought a small parcel for Karl. "Take this," I called and lobbed it over the guards into the ranks.

A rifle jabbed at the parcel as it flew through the air but Karl managed to catch it. By this time, the guards had

closed up their formation and Karl, hustled forward, marched off with the rest, endeavouring as he went to prevent the contents of the parcel from spilling into the roadway.

My action had some effect. The whips were not used again and after a weary trek, the deserters were marshalled through the gates of the heavy artillery barracks a mile or two away. Karl did not look behind again and for his sake, I did not call out to him. I think he knew that my sister and I followed him as far as we could.

But after he entered the barracks he was alone. No, not alone. He had friends and comrades all round him when he was despatched again to fight on his native soil for a nation he hated against a nation he hated still more. So, inevitably in his youth, he must have died. But where, or how, we never knew. For us, he was dead as soon as he turned from Riga's sunlit streets that day and was swallowed up in the military machine made by the Nazis and manned against their will by people who had been completely enslaved.

Processions of one sort and another were a common and tragic sight during the time the Germans ruled Latvia: processions of soldiers off to the front, of deserters, of Russian prisoners of war, of Jews. They were so common that we came to look on them almost with indifference. We averted our eyes and put shields around our hearts. There was so much misery in Latvia that human hearts revolted against the demands made on them for sympathy.

But on occasions even I, though hating the Russians, felt a pang of sympathy for some of the Soviet prisoners of war. In all kinds of weather, sick or well, the prisoners who could stand upright were made to march to and from work.

It was a familiar sight to see in the long columns, men being half-carried by their comrades or spurred to move more quickly by blows or kicks from their German guards.

One afternoon I was in the street when a party of half-starved prisoners turned into a block of flats which had been requisitioned for their quarters. The German *unteroffizier* in charge of the party ignored his wretched prisoners for a second or two and gave me a "come-

hither" smile. I walked over and we chatted casually until the last stragglers were in the courtyard.

Then I said: "Is it permitted for me to see how these creatures live?"

I don't know why I asked. Probably my motive was no more than curiosity though I always made it a rule to poke my nose into the affairs of both the Russians and the Germans when I could do so without obvious danger. One never knew what valuable information might come to light.

The German shrugged. "As you like," he remarked, "but don't attempt to give them food or you will be shot."

I walked up to the first floor and looked into one of the rooms. It contained no furniture but straw was strewn on the floor and I could see that the prisoners lived no better than animals. The stench of sickness and unwashed bodies was overpowering. Animals did I say? They were far worse.

Peeping through the door of another of the rooms, I saw three prisoners crawling towards a fourth unconscious man, with looks of indescribable bestiality on their faces. The leader of the three had a clasp knife in his hand and as I watched, he slit open the trouser leg of the unconscious man and carved off a small chunk of flesh. Horrified, I saw him divide it and hand the flesh to his goggling companions, who swallowed it greedily.

The unconscious man groaned slightly. "More?" said one of the grisly creatures. "Wait a little longer," said the man with the knife. "Tonight, he will be really dead. See, there is a nice piece here." The unfortunate man was so thin that I could scarcely believe the statement. But the man with the knife traced out an area on the dying man's buttock and bared his yellow teeth in a dreadful ecstatic smile. Starving, the man and his friends had turned cannibal and were eating their suffering comrades while they were still alive.

I turned away from the sickening spectacle and almost collided with the German *unteroffizier* who was standing just behind me. I was not squeamish. As a medical student, I was accustomed to the sight of death and mutilation but this was more than I could bear. I retched and felt that I was about to vomit. "So you have seen enough, *Fraulein*?" smirked the German. I nodded and

raced down the stairs as fast as my legs could carry me, into the wholesome air of the street below.

An army in retreat is a terrifying spectacle even for those whose knowledge of strategy and military affairs is limited. Panic spreads as quickly as a forest fire and when men turn their backs on the enemy and forget their disciplined ways in a blind desire to run, human beings lose such grace as God gave to them.

I saw the German army, beaten and panic stricken, in retreat from the Russians in the summer of 1944. The soldiers' panic was not a momentary thing. They had lived with it for days and it showed in their staring, bloodshot eyes and twitching limbs and in the way they looked constantly over their shoulders, as if afraid that the Russians were on their very tails. It robbed them of dignity, tolerance and good-humour, and of all initiative except in commandeering vehicles that would carry them away from the pursuing enemy. They stood so tightly packed in lorries that they could not fall down. They swarmed over tanks and gun carriages—going the wrong way for battle. They stood on the running-boards of cars and even stole horse-drawn carts to help them in their flight. Anything that impeded movement was flung away into hedges and ditches; anyone who stood in their way was ruthlessly mown down.

A German major stood by the side of one of the vehicle-choked roads and I saw that tears were running down his rugged face. He tried to stem the rush of men but might just as well have attempted to stop the rise of the sun. "Where is your manhood?" he shouted at the frozen-faced troops. The mudguard of a speeding car sent him sprawling and did not stop.

But before I saw the German army in retreat, I had seen savage fighting around Ostrov, a small railway town which had been reduced almost to rubble during the first German offensive.

My visit to the front was unexpected. Reporting for duty one bitterly cold morning, the commandant of the hospital sent for me and said I was under orders to leave almost immediately. It crossed my mind for a moment that someone had informed on me about my work for the underground and, as happened to soldiers in disgrace,

I was being sent to the front as a punishment. But the commandant's kindly tone reassured me.

"They have no X-ray outfit at Ostrov," he said. "They are under-staffed and say they work harder than we work here which sounds impossible. Men are dying because equipment is lacking. You will take an X-ray machine to them and help them for a time but I promise I will bring you back as soon as I can get a replacement."

With a doctor and a few gloomy officers, I flew eastwards in a small transport. I had no chance to say good-bye to my family and within two hours, in a snow-storm, had arrived at the hospital with the precious machine.

All the way from the cluttered air-strip, wounded men, covered with the grime of battle, dragged themselves through the snow as best they could towards the hospital, which had been established in a large hut not far from the front line. The hut had already been under bombardment. The shattered windows were covered with army blankets which kept out the worst of the weather but part of the roof had been blown into a nearby field and no one had had time to replace it. The wounded lay side by side in the straw, groaning and in some cases weeping, as the doctors and orderlies moved among them to dress their wounds and give pain-killing injections.

There was no panic at the hospital but there was also no time for courtesies. The doctor in charge, a stoutish man with a face disfigured by four sword-slashes, nodded a tired greeting and as soon as I had been shown the screened-off corner of the hut where I could leave my small attaché case, I was led to my place in the team that was fighting another losing battle—this time, the final grim struggle against pain and death.

I do not know how long this nightmare of an existence lasted—days or weeks—but it seemed never-ending. As soon as a batch of wounded was loaded on to lorries and sent on the way to Riga, their places were taken by other suffering men and the work began all over again. We ate when we saw soup and biscuits going round—if we were not too busy with our patients. In the evening, a swig or two of the fiery liquor samagonka—of which there always seemed to be a supply—kept us on our feet when we thought we would drop. Days spilled unnoticed into nights and usually some time after midnight, we managed to stretch ourselves on our piles of straw for an hour or

so. But soon after dawn, often before we had time to swill the sweat from our faces in a bowl of cold water, the casualties began to arrive again.

Men lived if we could tend their wounds quickly enough and the margin between life and death was always small. All the doctors had time to do was to patch and improvise and on the snap decision of a surgeon who was far too tired to think normally, a life or limb could be saved.

"Your foot must come off at once," said a doctor, examining a festering wound that already showed signs of gangrene. The *hauptmann* gestured violently. "I will not allow you to amputate," he shouted.

The doctor did not argue and turned to the next patient. I was with him when he examined the *hauptmann* again, after he had screamed with pain all through the night. "Your leg must now come off," said the doctor. "If I do not amputate above the knee, you will soon be dead." This time there was no argument.

The Germans resisted stubbornly but slowly they were forced out of Ostrov and into the open countryside. At night, the flimsy hut shook with the rumble of gunfire and by day, the Russians bombed the area incessantly.

One night during a lull, I was awakened by another sister while I was taking a cat-nap. "Listen," she said, shivering with cold and fright, "what do you make of that?"

I picked my way through the wounded on the floor and reached the blanket that served as a door. It was a sharp, moonless night and as the guns were still, I could hear words echoing from a loud-speaker somewhere in the vicinity.

"German comrades," said a beguiling voice, "why suffer any longer for the glory of your Fuehrer? Lay down your arms. Leave your posts and come over to us. We have food for you and vodka as well. Come over to us." The Russians were using propaganda as well as guns to win their war.

We all knew by now that if we stayed much longer at the hut the medical staff and wounded alike would fall into Russian hands as prisoners and though the prospect appalled me, I could not desert the men and women who showed such devotion to duty. "I cannot say we must move," argued the doctor in charge when his assistants

pointed out the danger, "I have no orders to do anything except stay. So stay we must."

But that morning the Russians gave him orders. Just as a soldier was brought in for a dressing a look-out ran excitedly into the hut. "*Achtung*," he shouted. "Three Russian bombers are heading this way. Everybody outside."

Soldiers had dug a few shallow trenches near the hut for use in air raids and all who could move rushed outside and flung themselves into them. If the bombers were aiming at the hospital there was nothing we could do to help the helpless; indeed, our first duty was to remain alive, so that when the bombers had passed and the bombs had slaughtered we could resume our work.

I landed in a trench on top of a beefy German orderly and the commandant of the hut dropped in lightly by my side, still holding a scalpel that he had been about to use. Wedged between the two, I felt I had some protection, though this was offset by the odour of dirt and fright from the orderly and the fact that the trench was half-full of stagnant water, the ice on which we had broken.

But there was no time to worry about smells and water. The bombs fell almost immediately we were at the bottom of the trench and the aim was excellent. After the first two, the rest of the stick were superfluous. "A direct hit," said the commandant, when the ground stopped shaking and the noise of the bombers receded.

Clods of earth were still falling all around us when we jumped out of the trench and looked towards the hut, which was about 40 yards away. At least, the foundations of the hut were still 40 yards away. The rest of the hut was scattered around in a crazy formless fashion and over the area lay a pall of greyish dust.

I could not believe at first that the hut had been demolished completely and gazed around somewhat foolishly to make sure that I was looking in the right direction. But the hut had gone and with it, the men it had sheltered. I started to run towards the ruins but the hospital commandant caught me by the arm. "Why run?" he said, with a weary grimace.

I understood at once what he meant. From the dusty heap that had served as a hospital, there came not a single cry, shout or groan. The wounded had been blasted out of their misery into eternity.

"What a waste," said the doctor, as we walked towards the remains of the hut as slowly as if in a funeral procession.

"Yes, Herr Doktor," I said, sadly, "War . . ."

The German interrupted. "I was not thinking of war. I was thinking of our efforts to keep those men alive."

The doctor still had his scalpel in his hand but it was all the equipment we could salvage. Everything else—instruments, utensils, machines, our own personal belongings—had either vanished or was not worth the trouble of taking away. Fortunately our biggest lorry had been out on a mission and when it came back, the commandant ordered his doctors, nurses and orderlies into it.

The retreat from Russia was beginning, but for us at least it was planned and orderly. The commandant eyed some of the panic-stricken, weeping soldiers we joined with icy disdain and at the end of the day, pulled off the road to offer his services to another field hospital, whose brown tents were already filled with wounded and dying men.

Once more, we plunged into the heart-and-back-breaking routine, of a field hospital attached to a defeated army. The lorries carrying fleeing German soldiers rumbled down the roads as turbulently as a river in full spate. After a day or two, the sound of gunfire drew nearer and the fighting swept towards us. Casualties began once more to roll in.

We moved several times before we crossed the Russian border into Latvia. Once or twice, the orderlies had no time or energy to put up tents and we carried our wounded into village houses for a few nights while awaiting orders. The villagers did not seem resentful, though whether this tolerance extended to the German army as well as to its hospitals, was hard to say.

The villagers saw we were short of food and on the go from dawn until long after nightfall. Out of their meagre rations they made soup and fed it to the wounded; girls who could not work in the fields or on the farms in such chaos willingly offered help at our makeshift headquarters. "Men make the mess but we women have to clear it up," said one of them with feeling.

Yet it would be wrong to say that we won the trust of these simple village folk, who, until the Germans invaded

their country, had probably never set eyes on a foreigner before.

A young girl in her late teens who had been helping me complained towards evening that she had a bad headache. I gave her two tablets and as she looked at them dubiously, explained that she must take them with water. "They are aspirins and will make your headache go," I said. The girl thanked me and filling a cup, pretended to swallow the tablets. But a moment later, she left the room and I saw her crushing the tablets into the mud with the heel of her boot.

Did she imagine that I was trying to poison her as a reward for her help? Or was it that she declined the medicine of an alien army from patriotic reasons, even though she needed it? I speculated for a moment but I was far too preoccupied with other affairs to give the matter much thought.

A confused mass of men and vehicles filled the streets of the frontier town of Daugavpils and I was glad that the commander of our little column gave the order to keep on to Riga. One of the wounded Germans in our lorry recognised the place. "When we came through here, we were on our way to Moscow," he grunted. "Now we are all returning to Riga. They say that soldiers are soldiers but we are only acrobats."

I had seen no signs of a stand by the German army to stop the Soviet offensive, yet it seemed to me that once they had left Russia behind, the Germans were content to halt their headlong flight. The cafés were full and the panic seemed to have abated a little. The guns were out of earshot and the Russian aircraft that flew over the town were reconnoitring, not bombing. But the Germans were short of fighters and obviously the bombing of such a fat target would not be delayed for long.

We drove into Riga at a fast pace and saw our wounded safely committed to the care of others less exhausted than we. News of the defeat of the German army had preceded us and though Riga was further from the battle than Daugavpils, nobody felt like sitting down and hoping for the best. Evacuation plans were ready and civilians who were not prepared to live under the communists again were already on the roads with their most valuable goods piled high on carts and prams. They were taking their cue

from the soldiers who obviously did not expect Riga to withstand the forthcoming assault.

"Come back early in the morning," the commandant of my old hospital said, when I reported to him. "A ship is sailing for Danzig at noon. I will do what I can to get you a passage on it."

My mother, who had been without news of me and had almost given me up for dead, burst into tears when I walked into the flat. "Oh, Asja," she said, embracing me, "you always turn up when you are needed most."

She and my sisters were prepared for flight on the following morning. Our belongings were stacked in neat piles in the flat and they had arranged for Kalnins, the greengrocer, to call with his cart at an early hour. "We must get out of Riga," said my mother, "I could not stand living in back rooms and slums again while the Russians search for us." I was too tired to argue and after a bath and a meal, slipped into a real bed for the first time for weeks and slept like a baby.

Kalnins had not arrived when I was ready to leave for the hospital on the following morning but I gave my mother a warning. "Do not go without me," I said, "Kalnins will be our second string. But have no fear, I shall be back as early as I can with passages on the ship for all of us."

I conveniently forgot my main purpose in nursing for the Germans had been to help my fellow-countrymen and convinced myself on the way to hospital that the Germans owed me a passage to Danzig. The hospital commandant was not so sure. Some of his staff had high priorities but he said his instructions did not include the evacuation of people like me, who had been born in Latvia. He was sympathetic and stuck stubbornly to his view.

"I have worked hard for you," I said, standing my ground. "Is this the way you Germans leave your friends in the lurch?"

I refused to leave his office and took up a position by the window while doctors came in and out of the room with papers for him to deal with. He was a harassed man and I could see that although he was not anxious to exceed his orders, his decision had distressed him. Finally, after an hour in which I resumed my arguments every minute he was alone, he gave in. He wrote out a

pass and added an official stamp. "This will at least get you on board the ship," he said.

I took the paper and read it. "But this is for me alone," I protested, "I cannot leave my family in Riga to the mercies of the Russians. There are plenty of people in Riga who will be willing to tell the Reds that I worked for you. I will not leave my family behind to die."

The commandant wearily began to argue again. "All you have to do is to add the words 'and family' after my name," I interrupted. "Who will check up at a time like this?"

He took the paper back again. "You are a very troublesome woman, *fraulein*," he said, making the addition to the pass.

I felt elated as I walked out of the hospital for the last time, but the thought that my battle was only half won sobered me. The Germans, as I had learned from experience, regarded passes as holy writ so long as they were in precise terms and the term "family" might easily be construed to cover half Riga. Nevertheless, I felt that if a hospital commandant had yielded to my arguments, so too might a ship's captain.

It was a heartbreaking task, as any woman knows, deciding what to pack for the voyage. My mother was in favour of trying to take trunk loads of clothes and other articles and I had to be firm with her. "One suitcase each," I said, packing up my own photographs, money, jewellery and underclothes into a small case, "otherwise they will compel us to leave everything on the quayside for others to steal. Besides," I said, "we shall probably be back before the winter is out. If the Germans have defeated the Russians once, they may do it again."

But I knew that even if my words convinced my mother, I was not fooling myself. I wandered round the flat in which we had lived for so long, touching objects that had become lovingly familiar. I pictured my father smoking his pipe in his favourite chair and my brother Karl lolling on the settee and talking of his latest girlfriends. I looked towards the corner where Zile's blood still made a dark stain on the skirting board. The memories came tumbling back and I could not bear them. We were leaving our beautiful city of Riga and I was sure in my heart that we should not see it again for a long time.

It proved easier than I had imagined to board the ship

but when we reached the quayside I doubted gravely for some time whether we should ever reach the gangway. The area was solid with people; animals and vehicles tried to force a way through and the noise and confusion made Saturday night in the Central Market seem like a sedate tea party. Frantic men and women pushed and pummelled each other as they tried to get to the ship or away from it; soldiers hacked their way in and out of the crowds; and policemen, jostled by everybody, swore continuously and reinforced their curses with frequent blows.

With my mother hanging on to me and my sisters holding on to her, I fought my way to the front of the crowd and up the swaying gangway. "I am Asja," I said, flourishing my German identity card, "and this is my family named in the pass." Before the astonished sailor had time to argue, I was past him and on board, pulling the rest of the family behind me.

The S.S. Steibel out of Danzig was a handsome vessel with three funnels and in normal times its accommodation must have been comfortable. But now the decks were crowded with soldiers and overhead cranes were rapidly filling the holds with military equipment. To add to the sense of confusion, scores of horses had been quartered below decks and were whinnying loudly and stamping their hooves in fright.

My mother and five sisters gazed helplessly at the disorder, and looked to me for the next move. "Let us go and get a cabin," I said. "We cannot sleep among all these soldiers. The cabins will have been reserved for women."

We found the purser and made our request. "And a steward to wait on you as well, I suppose, *fraulein*?" he said ironically. There was not in fact an inch of space in the cabins or above decks and after a thorough search, the best accommodation we could find was a place below decks with the soldiers looking after the horses.

Once my mother was settled, I went on deck with my sisters for a last look at the scene in the docks. By this time, the police had dispersed most of the civilians to the edges of the crowd but a few still tried to argue their way on board. A small group of middle-aged men, whom I recognised as Nazi collaborators stood a little way from

the gangway and were taking frequent swigs from vodka bottles.

"If you will not take us, we have nothing to live for," shouted one of the men, with tears streaming down his face.

We had not troubled to bring food with us. "We are going on a luxury ship," I assured my mother. "We shall have six-course meals all the way to Danzig."

As noon approached, I saw the purser again and asked what time lunch would be served. His answer gave me a shock. "No food of any sort will be served except to the ship's company," he said, adding that as the ship was not due to sail for two or three hours, there was still time to go ashore and get rations.

I broke the news to the family but now that they were safely aboard the ship, it did not worry them much. "We have hours to spare," said my youngest sister, Astrida. "There is plenty of time for me to go back to the flat and pick up a few more belongings and some food at the same time."

The plan seemed sensible and I did not try to stop her. I went with her to the head of the gangway and explained to the officer in charge what she intended to do. He agreed that she would be allowed back on the ship without fuss.

"Don't loiter," I cautioned Astrida. She tripped down the gangway and pushed her way through the crowd. I watched her walk along the quay and turn into the road which led to the residential quarter of the city. Now, every contingency seemed to have been allowed for.

Astrida could not have been gone for more than twenty minutes when I noticed that the ship's crew had suddenly become intensely active. Destroyers in the bay, waiting to escort the Steibel blew on their sirens, cranes were stood off and all along the ship's side, men were hauling ropes aboard.

"What's happening?" I asked one of the sailors.

"We have orders to cast off and put to sea at once," he said.

I did not think I could have heard him properly. "You are not due to sail for three hours yet," I said, thinking frantically that my sister could have hardly reached the flat.

"That has been changed, *fraulein*," said the sailor.

"The Russians are nearer than we thought, If we do not sail now, maybe we shall never go."

I gripped the arm of the officer in charge of the gangway just as he gave the order to pull it up: "But my sister," I said, desperately, "she will be back in just a few minutes. She has a pass to be on the ship. Can't you hold it up until she returns?"

The officer shook his head. "I am sorry, *fraulein*, I am truly sorry for your sister," he said, quietly, "but our orders are to sail immediately."

The gangway was hauled aboard and I scanned the crowd on the quayside anxiously hoping against hope that Astrida had heard the sirens and would come hurrying back to the ship. I should have spotted at once the little red hat she was wearing but there was no sign of it among the drab uniforms.

The engines began to open up and almost imperceptibly the distance between the ship and the quay widened. Scalding tears came to my eyes and I realised that now, whatever happened, Astrida would never join us. I looked over the crowd, some of whom were still waving half-heartedly and saw the pontoon bridge we had once blown up and beyond, the light yellow castle and the buildings of old Riga bathed in the thin October sunshine.

My mother joined me at the ship's rail and when she saw that I was in tears, knew at once that my sister had been left behind. We clung to each other for comfort. "My poor, poor Astrida," said my mother, in a faltering voice.

Astrida, like my father and my brother Karl, had walked off to an unknown fate and as we saw the city sink slowly below the horizon, we could do no more than pray silently for her.

But soon, we were praying for ourselves as well. The Latvian soldiers in charge of the horses, glad to have escaped from the advancing Russians and cheerful from *degvins*, were in an optimistic mood. "Don't worry, *kundzu*," said one of them to my weeping mother. "Hitler says we shall be back in Riga within three months. That's what the Germans tell us."

"I wish I were back now," said mother, mournfully.

I climbed the companionway, to escape from the pungent smell of the horses and as I emerged into the

open air, was ordered below immediately by a passing sailor.

I became aware of the reason at once. Approaching from the direction of Riga, was a formation of large aircraft. "Russians" said the sailor, blowing his whistle, "and they're coming straight for us. Keep your head down."

As he spoke, the anti-aircraft guns of the three German destroyers escorting us opened fire and their shells burst in sinister black puffs all around the aircraft. The Steibel's decks cleared, as if they had been swept by a gigantic vacuum cleaner.

Unhampered by fighters and ignoring the guns, the aircraft held their course. The sound of the guns intermittently drowned the drone of their engines. The sky around the aircraft was now thick with bursting shells and the Steibel began to zig-zag violently.

I stood at the top of the companionway, rooted and numbed by fear. I knew what it was to be bombed on land but this was somehow far more frightening. There was always somewhere to run on land and even lying flat on the ground, one had the feeling of being inconspicuous and safe. Suddenly, the ship seemed to have become an enormous target and its efforts to escape destruction pathetic and futile.

A few seconds still remained in which our fate hung on a thread. I saw the bombers break formation and dive, one after the other, on the ship. The guns continued to harass them but the pilots flew unharmed through the mass of black puffs.

When the bombs began to drop, they looked at first like fat black pencils but they grew ominously large as they hurtled obliquely towards us. The aim of the pilots was good but not quite good enough. As the bombers turned away, the bombs straddled the ship and threw up great spouts of water which carried on to the deck in a fine, stinging spray.

All except one. I heard a swishing noise overhead and before I fell in terror down several steps of the companionway, saw the single bomb strike and carry away the middle of the Steibel's three funnels.

The firing continued for some time but the ship, which had been strangely silent during the attack, sprang to life as soon as the bombs had fallen.

They said that the casualties were light—a few of the crew killed and injured—and since they were Germans, I did not feel disposed to go to their assistance.

The waters through which we had to pass were heavily mined and consequently the voyage to Danzig took close on 48 hours. Most of the time we were cold and afraid but the soldiers good-naturedly shared their rations with us and we were never hungry. This was a drawback in one sense because the soldiers became far too friendly for my liking and at night-time when we dozed uneasily through the long hours, I huddled close to my mother as much for protection as for warmth.

We were on a big ship but others fleeing from the Russians were far less fortunate. All the way to Danzig, we passed small craft laden so heavily that the gunwales were almost in the water. Some of the little ships made no more than a few knots and were quite unsuitable for anything except river or harbour work. Yet men and women were willing to flee in them rather than endure existence under the Russians.

From a distance of a mile or so, we saw one small launch strike a mine and blow up. None of the ships escorting us troubled to investigate and those aboard were left to their fate. "Poor devils," said a Latvian soldier, watching the boat disintegrate, "they must have been terribly frightened to risk their lives at sea in a craft like that."

"Ever heard of Siberia?" I asked.

I had been out of Latvia twice in my life before, once to Zakopani in Poland for the ski-ing and once to Berlin. Both places compared unfavourably in my eyes with Riga, whose bright light and spacious layout always appealed strongly to me. I admit I was biased heavily against Danzig long before I arrived. The past for our family had been full of danger and the future seemed dismal.

Considered without emotion, there seemed to be no way out for little Latvia. From time to time in the last few months, Latvian underground leaders had been in contact with western agents who had encouraged us to believe that they would help us in our fight against invaders. I do not know whether such help materialised but if it did, with Russian and the West as allies, it must automatically stop. Now we were to be refugees at the mercy of a

foreign, vicious and unfriendly people, who themselves were war-weary and on the verge of defeat.

I felt unutterably depressed as the ship steamed into Danzig on that biting October morning. The city was shrouded in fog, which I had never seen before. The Germans on the ship were jubilant that we had made the passage safely and in that I shared their joy. But in nothing else. Standing on the crowded deck, waiting to disembark, I prayed that it would not be long before I should have a country to return to—a Latvia free from bondage and master of its own fate.

MY own depression, overwhelming though it was, seemed insignificant compared with that of the majority of the Germans whom I began to meet in Danzig. The impression was widespread that Germany was losing the war. The voice of Goebbels, cosy and comforting was heard constantly throughout Germany, telling of the triumphs of the *Wehrmacht* but no propagandist talk could conceal the fact that the Germans had been at the gates of Moscow and were now tumbling over themselves to quit Russian and Baltic States.

Danzig had been heavily bombed and though I had seen myself the effects of bombing on the eastern front, it had been nothing like as widespread or devastating. Whole streets in the town were in ruins and we stared open-mouthed at the gaunt steel skeletons which had once been tall and solid buildings. Germany had brought war to her own people with a vengeance.

The town seemed full of refugees from Latvia and Poland and I learned the way to the military hospital without difficulty. My "papers" were in perfect order and the commandant merely glanced at them before he gave them back to me. "We are completely disorganised at the moment, *fraulein*," he said, wearily. "Our hospitals are full of air raid casualties and wounded from the eastern front. I hear that Riga was bombed heavily yesterday and the Russians are about to take the town. I will assign you to a hospital in a day or two when you have recovered from your voyage. In the meantime," he wrote an address on a scrap of paper, "if you will tell this lady I sent you, she will give you rooms. With all this bombing, accommodation is hard to get in Danzig just now."

The landlady was Polish and helpful. She even produced a chicken. "Your Latvian division is at Torno, a few miles away," she said. "If you come from Riga, you are sure to meet some of your old friends there."

I was not without other friends in Danzig. In the few hours during which I had notice that I would be able to leave Riga on the Steibel I was able to contact Lieut.

Vitols for further instructions. "You will find the underground particularly active in Danzig," he said. "They cannot carry out major acts of sabotage but they cut telephone wires and electric cables, switch traffic points on the railways and generally hamper the Nazi war effort."

Lieut. Vitols gave me a list of names of Latvian agents throughout Germany. "They will change but some may still be alive when you try to contact them. Memorise the list and burn it," he ordered.

One of the Danzig agents, Kruze had lodgings in a house near the Corridor and was employed in some minor capacity in a shipping office. He was under-sized and suspicious but as soon as I had convinced him of my *bona fides*, he became eager to enlist my help. "Latvians are deserting every day," he said. "The town and the Corridor are full of them. The entire division is disaffected and the Nazis know they cannot rely on it any more. By the way, do you know Stabins?"

Everybody in Riga knew Stabins, many by reputation and many personally. He emerged from hiding when the Russians left Riga and became one of the most blatant collaborators of the Nazis. He was tall and stout and had a mean face and red hair, together with a temper to match.

Kruze was well-informed about Stabins' plans. "He has been sent to Danzig to purge the Baltic division," he said. "His orders are to weed out all unreliable men, who will be sent to the eastern front. Already scores of men have been placed under orders to go to the east as a result of Stabins' activities."

Stabins was a long way from home but he was still living on the fat of the land. Both food and drink were short in Danzig but he had plentiful supplies and entertained other Gestapo officers in Danzig lavishly. "He brought many cases of *degvins* with him from Riga," reported Kruze. "He is up to his ears in the black-market in Danzig."

Stabins would have been disconcerted and uneasy if he had known the extent to which his movements were watched. Kruze had discovered somehow that Stabins intended to give a big party for influential Germans in Danzig. "He is trying to make his mark here as a big-

timer from Riga," said Kruze. "He has collected a vast store of liquor in his room at the Hotel Eden. If you will help us, Asja," said Kruze with a grin, "I think we can promise to divert the liquor to more deserving channels."

"What would you like me to do?"

Kruze explained his plan and although the effect would be no more than a pin-prick, I decided to do my part.

The following evening, dressed in my newly-pressed uniform of a nursing sister in the German army, I wandered into the Hotel Eden and found Stabins sitting alone at the bar. I caught his eye and after accepting the drink he sent over for me, motioned him to join me.

"I would not take a drink from a stranger, Stabins," I said, "but after all, we are hardly strangers. We are both from Riga."

I could see that Stabins did not quite place me but he was obviously in the mood for company. "I knew the moment you came into the bar that you were from Riga," he said. "Now, let me see. . . ."

"I was at the military hospital and have danced with you at medical functions," I said with a sunny smile. "Of course, I did not expect an important person like you to recognise me."

Stabins at once became expansive. He immediately recalled several meetings we were supposed to have had, and I, laying on a little flattery, made it clear that it was worth making the hazardous journey to Danzig merely for the pleasure of being entertained by him!

After the third drink, Stabins proposed that we should have dinner together, "Official business can wait," he said, waving his hand airily when I suggested that he would be neglecting the affairs of the Reich.

I agreed with a show of reluctance but stipulated that we should dine somewhere else. "These German women are so smart," I said, "I should feel out of place in the dining room."

Stabins was ready to accept any suggestion that would give him an evening with a presentable girl from Latvia and we left the hotel. As we emerged into the street, I noticed the slender figure of Kruze, loitering near the entrance, with another man.

I enjoyed the good meal he ordered at a discreet but expensive restaurant, although it entailed listening all

evening to the boastful Stabins; I enjoyed far more the thought that while I was detaining him, Kruze and his friends disguised as porters, were busy removing the store of liquor from his room.

The loot included ten cases of vodka and brandy, each case containing twenty bottles.

At the end of the evening, I declined Stabins' pressing invitation for a night-cap in his room, pleading that I must return at once to my mother. I had no wish to be around when Stabins discovered his loss. So I escaped but only on the promise that I would meet him on the following evening in the Eden bar. I need hardly say that I did not see Stabins then—or ever again.

There was work of a more serious nature for me a day or two later. An air raid was in progress when I made my way to the military hospital and to add to my discomfort a thick fog suddenly descended on the city. In an air raid shelter, I complained about the fog and the unpleasantness of life in general during wartime. "Anyone can see you are a stranger," said a man who seemed to be put out by my criticism of the city. "The fog is artificial. It is released to confuse the raiders."

Sure enough, the fog was clearing rapidly when I climbed out of the shelter at the end of the air raid. It was eerie walking through the streets in broad daylight with fog head-high to start with; but it disappeared quickly until it dropped to waist level and finally vanished altogether.

I had to wait an hour before I could see the commandant but he had news for me. "Orders have come in from Berlin that you are to go there at once," he observed. "Nurses are needed urgently in Berlin, where the raids have been heavier than here."

I said I would be glad to leave Danzig, if only on account of the fog.

"There is one small thing for you to do on the way," said the commandant, hesitantly.

I asked what it was. "There were sixty refugees from Latvia in the ship you travelled in," he said. "I am putting you in charge of the party as far as Berlin."

The commandant saw my look of surprise. "They will cause you little trouble, *fraulein*," he assured me,

apologetically. "Transport will be put at your disposal and rations will be available. I understand your feelings but you will be doing everybody a favour if you will conduct these refugees out of the city. There are still far too many people here, as it is," he added. "The Russians are getting nearer every day and the sooner the refugees get out of the way of our army, the better it will be."

Fortunately the commandant did not understand my feelings. Kruze had already discussed with me the problem of getting Baltic state deserters out of the vicinity of Danzig. They were a heavy strain on his organisation and he was hard put to supply them with civilian clothes and forged papers, let alone with food. Living in bombed houses and warehouses in Danzig, Gdynia and the old Polish Corridor, they were hunted ceaselessly by the Gestapo and when caught, were easy to identify by Stabins and his men. If I was to be in charge of a party of 60 refugees, what could be simpler than to enlarge the party unofficially by a few?

I could hardly wait to collect my documents and said a hasty farewell to the commandant, who continued to apologise for the trouble he was giving me. At our rendezvous Kruze examined the German movement order, carefully erased the number 60 on the pass—the names of the refugees were not specified—and said that my scheme was fool-proof. "I will send the word round at once," he said. "We will see how many soldiers we can fit out by the time you are ready to travel."

We had been on German soil only a few days but we had discovered that no one would go out of their way to help foreign refugees. Arrangements made for the German victims of war were magnificently adequate but refugees from other states were, as a rule, left to fend for themselves. No one would take them in voluntarily and few could be found who would give them a night's lodgings for payment.

I myself had been stranded when I visited the Latvian division in Pomerania. I had missed the last train to Danzig and searched fruitlessly for a hotel or boarding-house to take me in. In the end, through the connivance of an officer, I was able to spend the night in the division's barracks—a lone woman among thousands of men.

Luckily for the Latvian refugees, the students at Danzig's technical college had softer hearts than many of their elders. They immediately allowed refugees to sleep in some of the huts in the college grounds and next day managed to find a little accommodation in their own homes. But the refugees had not been widely dispersed and with the help of the students, I was able to warn the majority to be at the railway station at four o'clock on the following afternoon.

I arrived in good time at the station with my mother and sisters, who began to protest when they saw an apparently uncontrolled mob of soldiers and civilians in the station forecourt. "This is worse than the quay at Riga," lamented my mother.

But the confusion suited my plans. I spent some time organising the official party of refugees, counting them, explaining why they were being moved and to where, and generally calming their natural fears at being in a strange and inhospitable land in wartime. Then, when some of them at least knew what was happening, I walked over to where I had seen Kruze in close conversation with a well-set-up young man also dressed in civilian clothes.

Kruze greeted me warmly and introduced the young man as Karklins. Kruze was in a highly nervous mood. "I dare not stay here very long," he muttered. "This is the time when the Gestapo agents are busiest. Give me your pass, *fraulein*, and I will return it in a minute with the details filled in."

While he was gone, I chatted with Karklins and asked whether he was staying long in Danzig. "Only until the train pulls out for Neumunster," he said, with a laugh.

I saw the point of his remark when Kruze came back. "I have filled in the figure," he said, handing back the pass under the cover of a newspaper. "The soldiers are all on their own, you understand, but if you have any problems, Karklins, as one of your party, will help you to sort them out."

I glanced at the pass as I put it in my hand-bag. "But, Kungs Kruze," I said in astonishment, "my pass was for 60 only, you have altered the number to 300."

"Yes, yes," said Kruze hurriedly, "60 or 300, what is the difference? Once the pass has been altered, the number is immaterial. It might as well be 300."

"So, 240 soldiers are joining?" I asked.

"More, or less," answered Kruze, "but don't you worry your head about them. They will fend for themselves."

I felt profoundly uneasy at this news on several accounts. What explanation could I give, if asked, why I, a nursing sister, should be in charge of a party of 300 refugees travelling to Berlin by the roundabout route of Neumunster which was about 30 miles from Flensburg on the Danish frontier and Hamburg. I could think of none. Why should a party as large as 300 travel without German guards? It seemed an unlikely excuse that soldiers could not be spared from the eastern front.

The places *en route* where we were to stop were clearly set out in the pass. Suppose I arrived at any one of them with a party of 300 when the Danzig authorities had advised that only 60 should be given rations and accommodation. That was bound at once to raise suspicion in the minds of some officials.

There was yet another point. I knew nothing of the deserters who were to be wished on me—nothing of their reliability or character. If they landed in trouble, would not the authorities hold me responsible as the person in charge of the party?

Both Kruze and Karklins must have noticed my uncertainty and quickly reassured me. "You will be helping Latvians, *fraulein*," said Kruze, quietly. "To do that, one must take risks."

"You need not worry about the soldiers," said Karklins, "I will see that they do not trouble you at all."

I had been placed in a difficult position but it was no worse than some I had been in before of my own making. I could not blame Kruze, whose work exposed him to infinitely greater danger than any I should have to face.

"Karklins will let the soldiers know that you are in charge of the party," said Kruze. "If you arrive in Berlin with fewer than 300, your story will be that the rest have deserted on the way. You could not compel them to come with you. The important thing is to get the soldiers out of the Danzig region before they are rounded up and sent to death on the eastern front. Now," said Kruze holding out his hand, "I must go. I wish you good-bye and good-luck."

An hour remained before the train was due to start but it was barely long enough to enable me to get the refugees on to the platform and into the corridor. The compartments were full and soldiers and civilians were already overflowing into the corridors when our party of 300 began to fight our way on to the train. It was due only to weight of numbers that we succeeded.

Somehow in the struggle, the children in the party were not trampled underfoot, and women, by a miracle, were able to avoid being crushed to death. Refugees were separated from their luggage and the little food they had brought but that was shrugged off. The corridors, which had been jammed before, now became completely impassable. The toilets were unusable because they were filled with people who had nowhere else to stand or sit. But finally a whistle blew, the doors were shut, and among the waving mass of people on the platform, there seemed to be nobody who should have been on the train.

I have now no desire to dwell on or recall the misery of the journey which took three whole *days* to complete. People became faint and sick but the most striking thing was that nobody died. The railway line had been bombed in various places and the train often had to wait for hours while the line was repaired. The guard arranged for water to be brought to the train at intervals but it was impossible to get more than a cupful at a time and none was left over for washing.

We shared our food and managed to survive, though we got no rations. Once, the train stopped opposite a troop train and I heard soldiers speaking in the Latvian tongue. I forced my way to the open window. "We are Latvian refugees," I said. "If you have any food to spare, please pass it over." The soldiers' rations could not have been lavish but the response was astonishing—loaves, meat, chocolate and cigarettes literally flowed through the window.

At one small station, the Nazis had set up a check point and Gestapo officials came aboard the train demanding to see "papers." When a fat official reached me, I handed him my pass.

"Where is your party of 300?" he enquired, studying the paper.

I jerked my thumb in the direction of the packed corridor. "Down there," I said.

"And how am I to know that there are 300?" he asked.

"Herr Hauptmann has only to count them," I said.

He looked at me sharply to see whether I was pulling his leg but I kept a straight face. "I will take your word for it, *fraulein*," he said.

But the ordeal could not last for ever and, dispirited though we were, we managed to raise a cheer when the train steamed into Neumunster.

WE had travelled hopefully to the pretty little town of Neumunster, but on reaching there I felt it might have been better if we had not arrived at all. Our ragged and drooping column, hampered by crying children and luggage, managed to struggle into what was left of the town and I reported to the Kommandatura. The officer in charge could not believe his ears when I said that I had a party of 300 refugees outside in need of food and accommodation. He went to the window and returned, scratching his head. "The *fraulein* is right," he muttered to another officer. "What jackass has sent them to us to look after?"

A few frantic telephone calls produced a solution of a sort and, flanked by a dozen members of the German home guard, self-important and ludicrous in their ill-fitting uniforms, we were marched to the outskirts of the town and into a compound surrounded by barbed wire.

Inside the compound were a few tumbledown huts and adjoining was a larger compound guarded by men on high platforms, who trained machine guns inwards on the inmates.

It was easy to guess that it was a prisoner of war camp and the guess became a certainty when tough-looking soldiers with snarling Alsatian dogs suddenly appeared round the wire and took up posts at the gate of our compound.

The idea of being treated as prisoners did not appeal to me and while the rest of the party were exploring the huts, I approached the officer in charge of the guard, who was a frail but belligerent old man of at least 70. "Why do you treat us like prisoners and guard us with dogs?" I demanded.

He ordered the guard to open the gate to allow me to talk to him. As I approached, another guard raised his rifle to his shoulder and pointed it at me . . . a somewhat theatrical gesture, I thought, until I saw the look of determination on his wizened face. "We are not satisfied

about you or your party," said the man in charge. "Let me see your papers again."

I produced my papers and, shaking his head dubiously all the time, he read them with care before passing them on for the others to examine. "It is most irregular for foreign refugees to travel without a proper escort," he said to me, adding to his companions, "The security of the Reich is endangered. This sort of thing was one of our weaknesses in the last war."

By this time, word had gone round the camp that I was being questioned outside the barbed wire and the refugees, forgetting their bickering in the face of my danger, began streaming from the huts towards the gate. The noise they made attracted men from the adjoining camp who ignored the threats of their own guards and joined in the jeering.

The old man was greatly alarmed at the situation, especially when Karklins and one or two deserters started to shake the gate violently. The dogs began barking furiously and their handlers had difficulty in controlling them. One false move and an angry riot might easily have developed and been followed by a mass slaughter. But the old man was saved by an unforeseen event. He apparently believed in rule by committee and was about to consult some of the other greyheads when the air raid siren began to blow.

The scene was transformed in a moment. Seizing their dogs, the handlers hurried off round the wire towards the other camp. The old man gave a brisk order and doubled away as fast as his small, dodderly legs would carry him, followed by his less agile men. The prisoners disappeared into air raid trenches near their huts and I was left alone outside the locked gate, with the rest of the refugees urging me to join them inside.

I thought I should be better off where I was and called to the others to come outside. Karklins showed them the way. I had noticed before that he had been carefully examining the wire and already had found places where the strands were broken. Almost before the warning had died away the tiny gap had been enlarged and was big enough for a man to creep through. By the time the guns were firing at the aircraft overhead most of the refugees were running across the nearby fields and finding shelter in ditches.

The raid was short but extremely heavy. I had taken shelter near a small wood around which several anti-aircraft guns were sited, and as the ground shook from the hail of bombs, I thought that the gunfire seemed intense when there was no obvious target in view.

Fires broke out in several places around the camps and the wood and presently other aircraft followed and heavily bombed the town. When the guns were silent, Karklins who was in the ditch beside me, stood up and looked at the wood with curiosity. "You are thinking what I am thinking," I said to him. "There is more than meets the eye in this wood."

We left the others and began to walk in the wood but we had not gone far when we came across gaps between the trees in which dumps were covered by greyish-green tarpaulins. Karklins took hold of a sheet and pulled it back. "Aircraft parts by the dozen," he said, peering underneath. He examined a few more of the dumps. "We had better get out of here," he said, taking me by the arm. "They will shoot on sight if they spot us. It must be one of the biggest dumps for aircraft spares in this part of Germany."

I made a hurried sketch of the shape of the area and the position of the dumps and followed Karklins out of the wood. In Hamburg, the underground, I felt sure, would have channels for informing the West that in spite of the raid the dump in the wood was practically intact and worth a second visit.

We crossed the fields, thankful to have survived the raid and returned to the camp because we had nowhere else to go. On the way we found that some of the refugees had not been so lucky. A bomb, bursting near a large party, had killed several and so badly injured others that, even if they had had medical attention, they would have died within minutes.

In the camp, several huts had been wrecked and the grass, which grew thinly on the yellow sandy soil, was a carpet of flames. Outside the Red Cross hut just by the camp entrance, a 250 lb. bomb was deeply embedded in the ground but had not gone off. A nine-year-old boy was whimpering on the steps of a hut and looking uncomprehendingly around for his missing right arm. His mother had a badly mutilated leg and several other women had been cut by flying glass.

I broke open the door of the Red Cross hut and found some bandages but little else, and as the Germans did not return we buried the dead and patched up the wounded as best we could. Later I made a journey into Neumunster in search of a doctor but the entire town had been so badly bombed and fired that nobody would listen to me. Drugs were unobtainable and sympathy in very short supply. "We may come around to-morrow to your camp when we have attended to our own injured," said the doctor in charge of a hospital. Nor was the officer at the Kommandatura pleased to see me. "You were sent to a camp," he said, frowning. "You would be well advised to return at once. During heavy air raids we do not like foreign refugees wandering about the town."

I said we had no food and had had nothing hot to eat for several days. "Very well," said the official, "I will see that a field kitchen is sent up to the camp."

I could see I was doing the cause of the refugees no good by harassing officials who were already overworked, and I returned to the camp to find that one of my sisters had taken it on herself to allot the accommodation in the huts. She was being somewhat officious and the tired refugees, now in a highly nervous state, were beginning to resent it. "This has got to stop," I said to her. "We are a republic! If any orders have to be given, I will give them. Heil Hitler!"

The absurdity of the remark dissolved a tense situation and my mother finally stopped the quarrel by announcing that we were not going to sleep in the flea-ridden huts anyway. "We shall be far better off in the open fields," she said.

It was late November and the weather was bitterly cold but we found some loose planks and lay in a row in the corner of a field, covered by all the clothes we possessed. My mother took the end position and insisted on putting up her umbrella so that it partially covered us. "Even if it rains we shall be all right," she said.

When morning came I was by no means sure. We had all huddled in a heap for warmth but the cold and dampness of the earth had penetrated the various layers of clothes we wore. I felt stiff and chilled to the bone. We rose as soon as we could see what we were doing and returned to one of the huts. But the shelter it gave was negligible, since the windows had been blown out and the

door was missing, and the rank smell made me long to be in the open fields again.

The cold anæsthetised many of my nerves, and the lack of sleep and anxiety of the last few days made my head ache dully. But one thing the cold did not kill was my hunger. Indeed, it sharpened up my appetite until it reached the pitch of nausea and I began to eat a few blades of grass to appease my hunger.

I walked to the gate of the camp and noticed that 200 or 300 yards down the road stood a row of small villas. I knew it would be useless to beg there for food; if the people had any to spare, which was unlikely, they would certainly not be willing to share it with a foreign refugee. But I thought that their gardens might contain a few late vegetables, and if the occupants were still in the air raid shelters, it would be easy enough to slip in and pick an armful.

The guard had not returned to the gate, and I strolled down the road alone, trying to look as if I was taking a pre-breakfast walk. The first two or three gardens were completely bare, but I was thrilled to see that the fourth had a vegetable patch which had not been stripped entirely. I opened the gate as silently as I could, hating myself for stealing as I tip-toed across the garden.

Just as I was about to bend down and pull up a cabbage the door of the villa flew open and an irate German housewife came bounding towards me. Her red face was ugly with anger and her arms flailed like windmill sails in a breeze. She was a picture of concentrated rage as she screamed at the top of her voice. "Thief. Dirty thief. Robber."

They seemed extravagant words to describe a hungry girl trying to purloin a cabbage, but I thought it wiser not to wait and argue with her. I straightened up and made for the gate. Luckily for me I was the younger and fleetest of the two and I was safely inside the camp gate before she gave up the chase. I sat down on my suitcase, breathing heavily. The effort of running had quite exhausted me and I was now hungrier than ever.

The promised field kitchen did not turn up—I did not expect it would—but the refugees were now too cold, weary and apathetic to notice that they had not eaten for a long time. A little desultory quarrelling between two old sisters who had been nursing for the Germans in Riga

provided some entertainment. The sisters obviously hated each other but could not bear to be apart, and they blamed each other constantly for all the misfortunes that befell them. For the moment the younger of the two was at a disadvantage. In the confusion at the railway station she had lost her grip on one of her suitcases and had had to leave the station without recovering it. Fortunately for the sisters it was not the suitcase that contained their ample stock of gold and jewellery.

"Why trouble about the case?" said the elder sister irritable, for the tenth time. "It had nothing in it except your underclothes."

"It had my engagement ring in it," said the woman, wringing her bony hands. "I have kept it safe for forty years and have to go and lose it now."

Tired of listening to the old women, I walked out of the compound once more and turned along the barbed wire of the P.O.W. camp. The prisoners were already astir and some of them, attracted by the younger women in our compound, were looking eagerly in our direction through the wire.

At first I could not place them. They did not have uniforms but they looked as though they might be sailors from the sort of clothes they wore. They spoke no German and I tried several languages I knew until I found a man who answered me in Polish.

My sister Helena joined me and began to talk to some of the men in French. "They are all from torpedoed ships," she said after a few remarks. "There are English and Americans as well as Dutch and Belgians in the camp."

From their gaunt and dejected appearance, it was obvious that the sailors had been prisoners for a long time. They were pathetically anxious to detain us even though they could not understand what we were saying and I thought that their eagerness might as well be exploited. "Tell them we are hungry and have had nothing to eat for days. We might be more romantically inclined on fuller stomachs," I said.

The sailors had little enough to give but were willing to pay for their entertainment with what they had. They hurried to their huts and were back in a minute or two with little gifts that must have meant a great deal to them—the English produced tins of soup, the Americans cigarettes,

the Dutch chocolate, and a Frenchman, for some reason, threw over the wire a tin of peanut butter. "They say it is all they have left from their Red Cross parcels," my sister translated.

We chatted for about ten minutes and then said we must return to the camp to share their gifts. As we walked away, my sister shook her head in amazement. "We have a date for this evening," she said.

"A date?"

"Yes," said my sister, "the Frenchmen say that the guard on their camp is very slack, especially after there have been air raids. If we agree to meet them to-night they will dig under the wire and take us into Neumunster for a meal."

"But surely the guards will shoot them if they try to escape?"

"They didn't seem to worry," said Helena, "apparently they have done it before."

The last thing in the world I wanted to do was to indulge in a sterile flirtation with men for whom the war was over, but the thought of a meal was enticing, and I agreed to go along that evening with my sister. I said nothing to the others, but as a precaution invited mother to join us.

The Frenchmen were as good as their word, and we ambled down the unlighted roads into the town. In their berets and French-type clothes the sailors could not have looked more "foreign" to German eyes but it did not appear to trouble them. The company of women provided stimulation and, chattering gaily to my sister, they led the way into a small beerhouse-restaurant in one of the back streets.

The place was full of German working-men, drinking thin beer from mugs. The Frenchmen had money—they said in conversation that they had previously sold valuables owned by prisoners to townspeople for German marks—and bought beer for us. But, while I enjoyed the warmth and cheerful company, I was alarmed that there was no sign of food.

"Patience," said my sister, when she had questioned the elder Frenchman. "There will be food. They make a very good *stammgericht* here."

"What is *stammgericht*?" asked mother.

"A mixture of mashed potatoes and anything else that happens to be going," said my sister.

Apparently the *stammgericht* was served morning, afternoon and evening for as long as it lasted. "They say we must gobble up the food as soon as we get a plateful, and join the queue for more at once. If we are very quick and lucky, we shall manage to get a second helping," said Helena.

The younger Frenchman grinned delightedly as my sister translated his instructions and added a few additional sentences. "He says he once managed to get three platefuls in a session," said my sister, "but that was an exceptional night."

As we waited I glanced round the room at the sweating Germans crowded round the rough pine tables and said to my mother in a low voice that we had never had a meal before in such circumstances and company. I was a little giddy and light-headed from hunger and the heat of the beerhouse. I closed my eyes and kept them closed for a long time because I feared that when I opened them again, the Frenchmen and the beerhouse would have vanished and I should find myself awakening from a dream, surrounded by the refugees in the hut.

But the noisy shuffle of feet forced me to open my eyes again and I saw a queue forming at the counter, with the Frenchmen near the head. An Amazon-sized woman in a spotless white apron had begun to serve the *stammgericht* from a big can. The smell from the steaming dish was delicious and when I secured a piled-up plate and started to eat, I had never tasted anything more appetising.

Neither my mother, my sister nor I could eat more than one helping but the Frenchmen went round again and finished off a second helping like men who had not eaten for a month. We ordered more beer and sat back contentedly.

The Frenchmen could not have been more than 22 or 23 and seemed happy enough with their lot as prisoners. "Are they not afraid of being arrested and punished severely for breaking out of camp?" I asked my sister. "Surely these Germans would beat them up if they knew who they were?" The workmen in the beerhouse were brawny specimens, just over middle-age, but

several of them could have taken on both Frenchmen with ease.

"There is little danger," said the elder Frenchman, speaking through my sister. "The Reich is full of foreign workers. No one pays any attention to them."

"But if you can break out of the camp so easily, why don't you escape for good?" I asked.

The Frenchman answered at once. "Escape to where? My country is occupied. At the camp we do not work and our rations just keep us alive. If I had luck and reached France, which is unlikely, I should eat no better and would be a slave instead of a prisoner."

I could understand the attitude and although it would not have been my own, I could not blame the sailors for their quiescence. They were young; they wanted to stay alive. They must already have endured much and their spirit was not broken, even if the will to fight had disappeared. Their camp had become a haven and until the war was settled one way or another, they apparently intended to stand aside and wait, without danger to themselves.

Yet, it did not seem right. On the way back to the camp, when the elder of the two Frenchmen put his arm through mine—as a preliminary reward for his hospitality, I imagined—I felt a shiver run down my spine and I excused myself. "That sort of thing is not done in Latvia between strangers," I said, lamely. The truth was that I could not bear to be touched by someone in whom the vital spark of resistance to the common enemy had died.

The raiders came again that night and reduced more of Neumunster's streets of tiny houses to rubble. At dawn, after a sleepless night, I called the refugees together and said that we must leave the camp at once. "No one here will help us and no one cares whether we live or die. We must make immediately for Hamburg," I said.

Several of the refugees began to protest that they were too weary to move and my own sister and her husband joined the opposition. "Why go to Hamburg?" said Elsa, "the bombing is worse still there. For myself, I am going to Flensburg where we may find a little peace and food. And if we are to die, we might as well die in Flensburg as anywhere else."

The refugees broke up into small groups to argue out their plans and my mother tried to persuade Elsa to change her mind and stay with the rest of us. But Elsa refused to listen. "Very well," said mother at last, "I shall go with Asja, if she is going to Hamburg." The decision cost her a few tears, for she was fond of all her daughters and did not like to have favourites. "You see, Asja," she said to me when the others had moved away, "I would sooner die with you than live without you."

I kissed my mother and turned to Karklins for further support. By some means, he had been able to secure a little tinned food and he was strongly in favour of pushing on at once. "They will recover their senses in this town shortly," he said. "Then we shall find ourselves locked up as prisoners again."

In a matter of minutes, the refugees who had decided to go on to Hamburg were waiting and we set off in a biting wind. I was too busy to count how many were in the party, but it was obvious that the numbers were now considerably depleted. Some of course had been killed in the air raid and some were still too ill to be moved. If they survived for a day or two, the doctors in Neumunster would take charge of them. But of the fit—if cold and hungry people could be called fit—at least thirty had decided that their fate might as well overtake them where they were.

Although the hour was early, I did not think the town would be deserted, but not even a policeman or a home guard was on duty to query our movements or give advice. The railway station was eerily silent; we did not suppose it would be busy but it had seemed reasonable to expect that someone would be in charge.

Soon, however, the reason for the silence was clear. The station buildings were hollow shells and the actual railway lines had been torn from their sleepers by bombs and twisted into a variety of fantastic shapes. The railway sheds were heaps of brick and weeks of work would be needed before a single railway engine could run into Neumunster station again. The sight of such complete devastation was appalling but there was no point in sitting down and wringing our hands.

"There is only one thing to do," I said. "We must go along the railway line in the direction of Hamburg until we can pick up a train."

The idea of hitch-hiking for a lift along a railway line made Karklins and some of his soldier friends laugh heartily and we were all in a more cheerful mood when we had struggled over the bomb craters and left the still-smoking town of Neumunster behind us.

Now that the column was more compact, a new spirit began to animate it and people became more friendly and helpful towards each other. Soldiers who before had kept sullenly to themselves walked brightly up and down the railway lines, offering to carry suitcases or children or giving more elderly women an arm on which to lean. Karklins himself took great care to see that the column did not straggle too much and organised halts for water and the little food there was to share out.

About mid-day, our luck seemed to have changed. The party straggled into a small junction station and sat down on the platform while I interviewed the station-master. "You are lucky, *fraulein*," he said, when I had told my story and produced documents. "In half an hour, a train for Hamburg will be coming in. It has been held up for an air raid or it would have passed through two hours ago."

The station-master's information was correct and a short train of three or four coaches presently grumbled to a halt. The station-master, who had probably never had so many passengers embarking at his station at one time before, shepherded us aboard. The other passengers grudgingly made room and we all managed to squeeze into the train. The discomfort did not matter and we could put up with the shrill crying of tired and hungry children when we knew that we should not have to trudge every mile of the way to Hamburg on our own feet.

But our satisfaction was short-lived. At a crawl, we travelled for about ten miles, stopping frequently for long periods while the guard consulted with the engine-driver and then walked down the track to telephone for instructions. Finally the train stopped and did not start again. I leaned out of the window and saw that ahead a stick of bombs had straddled the railway line and torn up the track for a considerable distance. "We shall not be going beyond here," said the grey-haired old guard. "Our orders are to turn back until the repairs to the line are completed. You must all alight and finish your journey on foot."

We could have wept at the news and as soon as the refugees had collected themselves on the railway line, some of them did. I did not know how far we had to travel but Karklins guessed that it must be in the region of forty miles.

He seemed in no way dismayed at our latest set-back and his cheerfulness was a great tonic. "Dry those tears, *kundzu*," he said to a fat old woman who was almost at the end of her tether. "We will be snug in Hamburg eating our heads off before very long."

A few minutes later when we had passed a large gang of workmen repairing the line, he caught up with me and whispered: "Let that spectacle keep your feet from faltering, *fraulein*."

I nodded but could not trust myself to speak. The "workmen" were guarded by fat, muscular Germans with rifles, who stood over them shouting orders and varying the routine by occasionally landing a vicious kick. I had never seen men outside hospital who were thinner or more exhausted — not even the Russian prisoners of war working in Riga. In spite of threats and violence, the men could hardly muster enough strength to lift stones or railway sleepers and all their movements were slow, like those of aged and diseased men. "From the local concentration camp, I've no doubt," said Karklins, adding sombrely, "we know where they are going but I wonder where they came from?"

The railway guard had said that we should almost certainly be able to catch another train a few miles further down the line and his assurance kept us going for a time. But night came and there was no sign either of a train or a railway station. "We must camp on the embankment," decided Karklins. "It would be madness for a large party to continue walking down a railway line in the dark. Tomorrow, our luck may change."

We huddled together on the sheltered side of the embankment and tried to keep our teeth from chattering. Aircraft droned overhead; children screamed just when it seemed that we had all settled down to doze and men and women muttered and groaned as nightmares spoiled their light sleep. I had eaten better than most of the others but it was a disadvantage. All night long, I could think of little else but steaming plates of *stammgericht*.

Next morning, Karklins and I had great difficulty in

arousing many of the refugees and a large group who had come from the same district, told us despondently that they would go no further. "We will stay here until a train comes," said their spokesman, a thick-set, middle-aged man whose sprouting beard gave him a ferocious look. "Our women have no more strength to go on with this imbecile walk."

My mother, seeing that my patience was becoming exhausted, attempted to urge them on but I stopped her. "Save your breath for those who are willing to continue," I said.

We struggled along but as the hours passed, more and more people in large and small groups fell out. Some stopped at wayside halts and invaded the small waiting rooms; others gave up when they saw an apparently endless length of track stretching out before them. "How can I go on when I have nothing left to walk on?" cried a girl in her late teens. She held up a flimsy shoe, the sole of which had been ripped from the upper part by the sharp flints on the track, and I saw that her foot was covered with blood.

The camaraderie had now vanished altogether and bitter quarrels broke out as women stumbled against each other in trying to keep up a steady pace. When things were blackest, some of the women did not hesitate to turn on the deserters who were doing their best to help those with the heaviest loads to carry. "Look at them! They don't think to help me," cried a young matron, whose only luggage was a small attaché case. "Hulking brutes! Lazy scum! My husband is doing his duty with the army. Why shouldn't they be fighting, instead of running away like cowards?" The woman collapsed, weeping hysterically, and only Karklins' kindly persuasion got her to her feet again.

The hidden reserves of food that most refugees secreted in their cases had long since been eaten and at small villages by the side of the railway track where we halted to rest, I busied myself trying to exchange trinkets for food. But the peasants were suspicious and drove hard bargains when they would agree to barter. An expensive gold brooch, in the eyes of an old farmer, was worth two loaves and a smallish German sausage, and he parted with his food only after biting the brooch to make sure that it was real gold.

I lost all count of the time and I was surprised when I was discussing the march with my mother later that I could not remember whether it was three or four nights that we had camped by the side of the railway line, or what sort of country we had passed through, except that there were miles of forests without houses at which to beg for food or water. I remembered hunger and blistered feet during the day and the cries of children and the bitter air at night. But the rest had been mercifully expunged from my mind. I could not remember the officials we saw at the railway stations who urged us impatiently off their premises or the police who appeared occasionally to demand papers and escort us out of their districts.

With the sudden anger of helpless people, we cursed the bombers that had put the railway line so completely out of action. I had begun to wonder how much longer we could continue when a soldier who had been foraging in a village a mile away came back with good news. "They say Hamburg is only twenty kilometres away," he shouted. "With luck we should be there tonight."

Hamburg was not journey's end but at least it was a welcome staging post—the magical name that had kept us going through the weary days. In Hamburg, we should be able to rest our weary limbs for a time and eat our fill. The news that it was just over the horizon brought us all to our feet and we set off again with hearts that were almost carefree.

THE German official at the Hamburg Kommandatura sat back in his chair with his arms clasped across his paunch and asked in a supercilious voice: "And what, *fraulein*, do you expect me to do for 66 refugees who come from—where do you say?"

"Latvia," I replied, with growing anger. I had been scarcely able to hobble into his room—a make-shift office, admittedly, since the previous Kommandatura had been razed a night or two before—yet he had not offered me a chair or risen to his feet when I entered. On paper, I was a German nursing sister and, shabby and exhausted though I was, I was entitled to respect from every fat Nazi in Hamburg.

Old Baldy—as I named him mentally—pored short-sightedly over my documents and I knew at once what was coming. "Your pass says that you have 300 refugees under your care. Why have you brought only 66 to Hamburg? Where are the rest?"

I could have smacked his smug face but with an effort I kept my hands to myself. "The rest? Well, a considerable number were killed in an air raid at Neumunster. The rest are littered along the railway line between Neumunster and Hamburg, along which we have walked because of a lack of trains."

"Along the railway line?" said the official.

"Yes, along the railway line. What do you suggest I should have done with the rest? Carried them on my back?"

Baldy did not seem certain whether to be hectoring or sympathetic but he took a long look at my dusty, aggressive face and crumpled clothes and decided on kindness. He came round the trestle table he used as a desk and patted my shoulder paternally. "You are tired, *fraulein*. You have had a hard time these last few days. You should not have been sent alone in charge of 300 refugees who may be for all I know anywhere in the Reich by now. But you must remember that we in Hamburg have been through a trying time too during the last few days. You

have been in the air raids in Neumunster, *fraulein*," he said, shaking his head, "but let me assure you that Neumunster has escaped lightly compared with us. As a city, Hamburg has ceased to exist."

Baldy did not exaggerate. In Russia, I had seen villages and small towns flattened by bombs but this was destruction on a gigantic scale and I could not begin to estimate the power and concentration of some of the bombs that had wrecked huge buildings and enormous blocks of flats. Baldy's self-assurance, as he spoke, fell from him and I saw that he was really a tired and beaten man.

"The raiders will come again soon," he said. "Your best course is to leave Hamburg immediately with your party."

"But we have only just arrived," I said. My walk through the battered streets to his office had convinced me that we had come to the wrong place and I was anxious enough to fall in with his wishes. But I had no intention of leaving Hamburg in the same way and state as we had arrived. I could not have faced the refugees to give them the news that they must now march out of Hamburg and in any case, they would not—could not—have obeyed.

I informed Baldy that the refugees needed food, shelter and rest before they could move a yard; many of them were sick from hunger and exposure and must have medical attention at once. Baldy was anxious to placate me. "I can get you food of sorts, but as for shelter, you must take your chance with the rest of the population. The only safe places in Hamburg today are the air raid shelters."

He gave me the address of the nearest soup kitchen which had been set up to feed victims of the bombing and soon we were enjoying our first satisfying food for days, coarse though it was. In a nearby underground air raid shelter, nurses at the first aid post dressed blistered and bleeding feet and provided hot water for washing. The shelter was badly lighted and stuffy and as it had been in use continuously for many weeks, it smelled of unwashed bodies. But blankets were available and with other small comforts, the shelter seemed like a palace.

The bombers arrived punctually—so the regulars in the shelter said when the sirens blew—but they did not disturb many Latvians who after a few attempts to settle down

in the strange surroundings, quickly went to sleep. As I moved from group to group, making sure that everybody was all right, I even heard women apologising to each other for caustic remarks they had made during the journey.

Baldy was not at his office when I called early on the following morning to enquire about transport. I had told him that our destination was Berlin but that under no circumstances would we consider leaving Hamburg until we were assured of either lorries or a train to take us there. At the best of times, foreign refugees were an embarrassment to the authorities but during periods of heavy raids, they were a positive nuisance. I was sure therefore that Baldy would move heaven and earth to have the transport for us at the earliest possible moment.

But when he had not arrived, I was glad. Taking Karklins with me, I traced a small café said by Kruze in Danzig to be used by Baltic nationals. I was amazed to see the café still standing amid acres of rubble; still more amazed when, after drinking ersatz coffee for about an hour, the door opened and Balodis walked in. He raised a suspicious eyebrow at Karklins but I quickly explained who he was and his handsome face crumpled into a welcoming smile.

The last I had heard of Balodis was that he had been compelled to leave Riga police, where he worked as a detective, and join the Latvian division. "Somebody talked too much; fortunately I heard in time," he said philosophically. "The only way that I could prove I was 'loyal' was to join the army. So now you see me here."

His *non sequitur* was explained by the fact that Balodis had gone to Germany with the Latvians but had deserted and, using forged papers, spent his time in contact with members of the underground in Hamburg and Berlin. His chief work was helping other deserters. "There is little we can do in the way of sabotage in Hamburg," he said, with a smile. "All that is taken care of by the R.A.F. and the Americans." But he was delighted when I told him of the large store of aircraft parts near Neumunster and gave him a rough sketch map showing the location of various dumps in the wood. "I think we can guarantee a second visit by the bombers to Neumunster," he said.

I was sorry to say good-bye to this brave and imperturbable man who ran such risks to help his fellow

countrymen, for I always felt that any parting with him might be the final one. He was sorry to see me go; he regarded me as a trustworthy comrade and I know that it was with reluctance that he ever asked me to undertake dangerous work. But he gave me an address where I could contact him in Berlin on his return. "If you are going to work in a Berlin hospital, Asja," he said, "there will be plenty of the old sort of work for you to do. Latvians are more than ever disgusted with the idea of fighting for the Germans—even against the Russians."

We hastened back to the Kommandatura office and found, as I had anticipated, that old Baldy had allotted two large lorries to take us to Berlin. It was not *de luxe* travel but it was far better than going in a crowded train. The refugees were still resting in the shelter and did not take long to round up. After another meal at the soup kitchen, we clambered into the lorries and found to our surprise that there was ample room for everybody. Luckily, old Baldy was too busy to see us off and did not depute anybody to count us or it would have been found that at least twenty of the deserters had decided that Hamburg offered a better chance of survival than Berlin. I never heard of them again.

All the way from Neumunster to Hamburg, Karklins and I had talked incessantly of the sights we intended to see when we arrived in the city but we were leaving without seeing anything except the inside of a soup kitchen and an air raid shelter and extensive ruins. "So you never saw your famous Street of the Prostitutes," I twitted Karklins.

The young man seemed slightly ashamed that I should have told the others of his wish to see such a street. "No," he said, grinning, "but I will one day. And talking of that sort of thing, has anybody seen little Paula?"

Nobody remembered seeing Paula that day and she was not in either of the lorries. Paula was a vivacious girl, not more than 17, who willingly helped mothers with their children when they could coax her away from the company of the deserters. "Man-mad," the other women called her. Young though she was, she certainly knew how to attract men and was never without an escort of two or three. On the way to Hamburg she wore a fur coat; she was a girl from a poor family but she had plenty of sense and constantly proclaimed that she was glad

she had chosen to take a fur coat from her admirer rather than a diamond ring. The girl talked a great deal, which was fortunate for all of us because we learned at an early stage in the journey that the coat had come from Stabins, the collaborator we had robbed in Danzig, whose mistress she had been.

"Poor Paula," said Karklins, sentimentally, when he was certain that the girl had stayed behind in Hamburg. "It would be really ironic if she finished up in the Street of Prostitutes!"

We jolted happily in the lorries for two or three hours and despite the fact that we were badly shaken about, some of us managed to rest. As leader of the party, I wrestled with my own private worries. I knew that unpleasant enquiries might be made when I reached Berlin and explained that a large proportion of my party of 300 was missing. It would be more awkward still for me if the authorities had become aware that the party should have numbered no more than sixty anyway. Pondering sleepily on my dilemma, I had just decided that my best course would be to destroy my pass before reaching headquarters when the lorry jerked to a halt.

A policeman appeared over the tailboard and demanding to know who was in charge, asked for my pass. He inspected it casually and announced that we could go no further.

"You must alight and make your way to the nearest railway station," he said. "The lorries must return to Hamburg. Accommodation will be reserved for you on the next train for Berlin."

The effect of his words was like a blow in the face. Tired though I was, I was incensed at what I considered to be double-crossing on the part of the Hamburg authorities and demanded to know why we could not continue. "The roads are reserved for important troop movements which are taking place tonight," was the answer.

"But the people in Hamburg must have known of this when they sent us off in lorries," I said angrily.

The policeman said mildly that he was not responsible for what was done in Hamburg. "My orders are to stop all traffic on the road and turn it back."

He and his two colleagues at the road-block were a forbidding trio but unlike me, they had no memories of a long and painful march and several bitter nights spent in

the open air. He ordered me from the truck again and I began to shake with rage at the injustice of the position. I refused heatedly to leave and turning to the others, told them what we were being ordered to do. "Nobody leaves this truck," I shouted. "If they go back to Hamburg, we go with them. Otherwise, we go forward to Berlin."

It was growing dark and several children, awakened by my shouting, started to cry. The other two policemen climbed up on the lorry and inspected the apathetic and weary people in my care. "Look at them," I said, pointing to the mothers nursing their children and deserters pretending to be fast asleep on the floor of the lorry. "How can you expect people so exhausted to get out and walk anywhere? They would die by the roadside."

The policemen were nonplussed. They seldom encountered open defiance from Germans, let alone foreign refugees, and did not know how to deal with it. They withdrew to the centre of the road and began to talk the situation over.

I walked to the edge of the lorry and leaning on the tail-board, addressed them again. "All these people are connected with high Latvian officials who have performed great services for the Reich," I said. "How else do you think they would be travelling in army transport? If they are late in arriving, many searching questions are going to be asked."

The policemen continued to argue among themselves and I did not expect my words to have any effect. "They will remove us forcibly one by one," I said in a whisper to Karklins. "We shall be out on the road within five minutes."

My feet ached at the mere thought of walking again and my eyes filled with tears. But to my great surprise, the senior of the policemen again came forward and addressed me in a conciliatory way. "We realise your position, *fraulein*," he said, "and we do not wish to inconvenience you. But we dare not let you through to Berlin. However," he continued agreeably, "there is a solution. Eight miles from here is an important railway junction where you will easily get a train to Berlin. I am prepared to allow you to go so far, with one of my officers as an escort, of course."

I realised that the policeman was making a great concession and though I was bitterly disappointed that we

could not make the whole journey undisturbed in the lorries, I agreed to his proposal, after a show of hesitation.

We might have fared worse. A train was not expected until midnight at the station, but there was a warm room in which we were allowed to wait. Soup could be bought at a canteen and nobody was sorry when the train did not appear on time; in fact, most of the refugees slept soundly on the hard benches until the early hours of the morning.

The worst of the long journey was over; the train that finally limped into the station was not so full that we could not all either find seats or at least room to sit on our luggage. Like all other German trains, it went by fits and starts and its halts lasted for hours while bomb damage to the lines was repaired. We grew hungry, lost our appetites through lack of food, and grew hungry again. But, for the rest of the journey, we were not cold and we were not foot-sore. We could bear all other tribulations with patience and a show of fortitude.

A party of 300 had set out from Danzig and because of the rapid advance of the Russians, we had been glad to go. There was no real reason why any of us should have felt that we would be happier in Hamburg or Berlin. Hamburg had been a delusion and I had a strong suspicion that Berlin would be no better for most of the refugees.

But Berlin was *my* destination, the place where my work was to be done. I had agreed to take charge of the refugees at Danzig because although I knew that a large number of them were Latvian sympathisers of the Nazis, the job gave me a chance to help soldiers opposed to the regime. In and around Berlin there would be more soldiers to help and an underground that might be able to play a part, however tiny, in defeating the Germans and speeding the liberation of my country.

Our first few hours in Berlin were as uncomfortable and unpleasant as they had been in Hamburg. They were, indeed, a replica. Cramped and tired, we reached Hoffbard station during the evening and assembled in a corner of the dimly lighted concourse. I had various addresses to report to but the first need was food. Hunger, as I had found, is a great spur on some difficult occasions. It makes one unreasonable and less likely to be intimidated by officials. But that night, I knew that I should

be able to wind up my mission more satisfactorily on a warmer and fuller stomach, and I led the way out of the station in search of a buffet.

War-time Berlin did not offer much choice but a walk round the streets near the station brought us to a small restaurant where they were serving potato soup and a small piece of black bread as a complete meal. It was better than nothing and we sat down, sniffing appreciatively the aroma of the soup. But before the proprietor could do more than put platters on the table, the sirens blew. He turned as pale as a man who has seen a ghost and excitedly rushed us all out of the room, locking the door on us.

The streets were dark and on the outskirts we could see searchlights beginning to light up the sky. No one would stop to tell us where the nearest shelter was and, hurrying like the rest, we returned to the station to find out. A military policeman immediately hustled us across the road and led the way to a deep and well-constructed shelter. From his haste it was apparent that foreign refugees especially must go underground during air raids.

The raid began a few minutes later and lasted for an hour or two. Deep below street level I felt safe, but even at that depth blast penetrated the shelter and swept up white dust in clouds. The earth trembled as if shaken by a violent earthquake and there was a continuous rumble as bombs came down and hurled steel and bricks and mortar to the ground.

The raid seemed to have been concentrated on the centre of Berlin and when we emerged from the shelter into the street, the fire fighters and rescue teams were taking the disaster in their stride. They worked methodically and without fuss but, naturally, they showed impatience when I tried to discover from them the location of the address to which I had to report. I cannot say I blame them but I persevered, believing that temporary accommodation might be more easily available after an air raid when we could be absorbed among many other homeless people.

I found the district in which my headquarters were situated. Picking my way over the fireman's hoses, I found the street. I found the building. Or rather, what was left of the building. "Back to the railway station," said Karklins, who searched with me. "We had better

spend the night there and you can start looking again in the morning." I was grateful to Karklins for his presence and help. He had no intention of reporting anywhere himself, except to the Latvian underground chief, and if accommodation had been found that night, he would certainly have been unable to share it.

At the station, the refugees were in turmoil. The military police had begun to question them and as few of the refugees could speak German except with a heavy accent, they had become suspicious at the presence of such a large number of foreigners at the railway station. My "papers" allayed their suspicions. "We will fix you up with accommodation for a few hours, until morning when you can make your own permanent arrangements," said a young military police captain.

With a few other people who were stranded, we were taken to a hotel a few hundred yards from the station. It was small and unpretentious but the staff had either gone to bed or were still in the air raid shelter and the military police themselves showed us where we could sleep.

Two lounges were big enough for all and those who did not get easy chairs or settees to sleep on, used rugs or carpets. A nun who had joined on to the party, and I, watched the refugees settling in and prepared to find a corner for ourselves. The military police captain stopped us. "If you and the sister would care to follow me, *fraulein*," he said, "I think we can find you a bed."

A bed for the night sounded too good to be true. We followed his light up the stairs and on the second floor, he pushed open a door. "You must be careful not to wander about in the night," he said, flashing his torch until he found a candle to light. "You see, the hotel was damaged by a bomb tonight."

"Damaged" was an understatement. The room into which we were shown had only three walls and, peering through the space where the fourth should have been, I saw that the centre of the hotel had been completely wrecked by a bomb which had fallen into the courtyard. The missing wall of our room had collapsed outwards and there was very little mess on the thick carpet. The room was well furnished and must have been one of the best in the hotel. The ornate gilt chairs were

undamaged and the chandelier was still in place. The big double bed looked inviting.

We smiled our thanks and said goodnight to the policeman. When he had gone the nun locked the door. The action struck me as slightly absurd but I said nothing. I had almost forgotten what it was like to live like a civilised woman in reasonable comfort.

The nun carried a small case which she placed on the bed and opened. It contained only a night-gown and a prayer book. She began to take off her heavy habit and chatted gently as she did so of the terrible times we lived in. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of her before she slipped on her night-dress. Until that moment, I had always assumed—though I do not think I had ever given the subject a moment's conscious thought—that under every nun's austere habit would be uncompromising underclothes to match—shapeless linen garments devoid of any feminine frills.

But this nun wore the most soft, frilly and alluring underclothes I had ever seen. Even by candlelight, I could see that they were made of fine silk and the sight startled me far more than the missing wall of our bedroom.

The hotel was a shell. The nun who climbed into bed beside me wore frilly underclothes. And I, a Latvian girl from Riga, was in Berlin in charge of a party of refugees. When I fell asleep surrealistic dreams disturbed my slumber.

After the rigours of life on the Russian border, the voyage to Danzig and the terrible journey from Neumunster to Hamburg, Berlin seemed to offer a reasonable prospect of a period of comparative peace for fruitful underground and "welfare" work. The air raids were a nuisance but they could be endured. Looking as far to the future as one dared, Berlin seemed to be a safe place in which to await—and hasten the fall of the Nazis and the arrival of the Allies. If the Russians came first, it would create an entirely different situation, but no one—not even refugees in an inhospitable foreign country—took a sufficiently detached view of life to worry about what *might* happen.

Balodis arrived from Hamburg two days after us, chiefly, I think, to make sure I had reached Berlin safely.

But I was already in touch with his lieutenant, a soldier named Johanschtal, who was in his mid-twenties and as fair as a Saxon. He wore civilian clothes and, as he had a job in the office of the Latvian Government where refugee and other problems arising from the German occupation were handled, he could mingle freely with all Latvians in Berlin.

He said the Nazis were becoming very concerned about the number of deserters from the Baltic division and about foreigners in general, now wandering about Berlin. Some were Belgian, French and Polish civilians who had tired of working virtually as slaves in factories for their Nazi masters and were living in the cellars of bombed buildings. As soon as I was assigned to a hospital post, he said, I would be in a position to get uniforms and arms for them, as I had done in the Riga days.

"But I must warn you, Asja," he said, earnestly, "you must be on your guard more than ever here. Trust no one, not even Latvians, until you are absolutely sure they are reliable. Already some of our people have been betrayed."

Balodis talked optimistically of the damage that the refugees would be able to do to the Nazis when the Allies were within striking distance of Berlin. "The Nazis are harbouring a Trojan horse," he said. "There will be several thousand Baltic patriots ready to tear them to pieces when the time comes." But he was silent about the prospect of getting the Russians out of our country and in our talks the subject of the liberation of Latvia did not once come up.

I had already reported to the headquarters of the medical corps in Berlin and officially handed over my refugees. I said nothing about numbers and did not produce my travelling pass. The authorities seemed relieved that they could account for at least a few of the refugees in the city. As a nursing sister, attached to the German army, I was welcomed without question or screening.

"Report to this hospital in three days' time," said the doctor in charge of nursing, giving me an address on the outskirts of the city. "We need every pair of hands we can get. There have been casualties from the air raids but our main problem is to deal with the wounded from the eastern front."

But towards the end of my first day at the hospital, I

was summoned to the commandant's office and the order made me tremble with fear. It was a short walk from the small clinic I had taken over but as I followed the orderly, I imagined a number of things about which the authorities might wish to question me: the refugees I had brought from Berlin, my underground contacts in Hamburg and in Berlin itself, my activities in Riga and a dozen other matters about which the Gestapo might have found out.

The commandant's unhappy face made me more nervous still but he quickly set my fears at rest. "I am sorry you are not to be with us very long," he said, "you were posted here and I am sure you would have been most useful. But I have orders to send you immediately to a hospital at Dobrzani, a few miles from Prague."

Relieved as I was that my own personal position was not in question, I was nevertheless disappointed that I was forced to leave Berlin so quickly. I began to protest but the commandant silenced me. "Whatever my own feelings, I cannot keep you," he said, helplessly. "The orders have come from above. I cannot question them."

"I cannot go, Herr Kommandant," I said, relying on a few tears to move him. "My mother and three sisters were granted permission in Riga to travel with me. I cannot now leave them in a strange city alone. If you insist, I must resign as a nursing sister."

The commandant grasped at the chance I gave him. "You will not be going alone," he said. "Your mother and sisters will travel with you. In fact. . . ." He paused for a few moments. "The truth is that Berlin is too full of people," he said. "The R.A.F. have brought the city to a state of siege. It has been decreed that only essential personnel must stay behind. You were saddled with a number of refugees to bring from Danzig to Berlin. It was a mistake. Now the refugees must leave and you are the person chosen to take them away."

Pictures flashed through my mind of the unbearably crowded train to Neumunster and of the tragic column that had struggled along the railway track to Hamburg. To be called on so soon after such an ordeal to undertake another journey which would probably involve the same sort of travel was more than I could stand.

The commandant might have read my thoughts. "Everything will be organised for you—travel, rations and documents—so that you will have a trouble-free

journey," he said. "You will take your own refugees and a number of others who have work waiting for them in the Prague area."

I could see it was useless to argue further with him. The alternative to carrying out his orders was to disappear and while I might have gone underground in Berlin with some expectation of avoiding capture, it would have meant abandoning my greatest personal safeguard—my assumed identity as a German nursing sister.

I dabbed my eyes and asked when the movement order would be ready. "By mid-day tomorrow, *fraulein*," he said. He seemed relieved that I had not created greater fuss. "Believe me, the only way to endure this terrible war is to take orders as they come and simply carry them out," he said.

South-west to Leipzig. Onwards to Dresden. The countryside became less harsh even though it was winter, but nobody was in a mood to admire the scenery, and except that we had rested for a short time and carried better rations, the journey was hardly less dreadful than that to Hamburg.

My party had grown almost the moment we had left the Latvian Government headquarters. One of the convoy of four lorries taking us to the station fell out of line on turning the corner and by arrangement with someone in the lorry, a dozen lusty young men climbed on board. Balodis had warned me this would happen and I said nothing.

At the station another score of young men joined on to my party, among them Balodis himself, who stood unobtrusively near the newspaper kiosk and ignored the rest. Johanschtal, as an official of the Latvian government office was much in evidence, importantly consulting officials and making enquiries about trains but turning a blind eye to the fact that an authorised party of 50 had grown to nearly 100. The authorities were anxious to get rid of refugees but this was not the way they had in mind.

I had decided not to worry unduly about my responsibilities as leader of the party but could not help wondering suspiciously about the number of voluble Frenchmen and Belgians who were attaching themselves to us. "Be careful of them," said Johanschtal, when I spoke to him. "Their papers seem to be in order but you can never be

sure. Let them join on but take no responsibility for them."

I was glad that Balodis was on the train when it pulled out of the station; glad of his quiet helpfulness in succeeding days when trains refused to run or came to a standstill at the edge of bomb craters; glad of his support in quelling the French and Belgians who, ludicrously, seemed to hold me personally responsible for the never-ending disasters that overtook us.

Balodis came to my help at one particularly dangerous moment between Leipzig and Dresden. The railway had been damaged by the bombers and, sick at heart, we had jumped from the carriage and started to walk towards the next station. We were all feeling tired and hungry and the bitterly cold wind did not improve our spirits. The railway line was flanked by avenues of pine trees and as we plodded among the cones, I suddenly observed a camp in a clearing on the right. It was enclosed by barbed wire and at first I thought it was part of an army camp. But I soon knew I was wrong.

"My God," I said, clutching Balodis by the arm. "Look at those poor creatures."

Attracted by the talk of a train-load of passengers walking through the pines, the inmates of the camp had straggled from their huts to the barbed wire fence. I could hardly believe they were human beings. Their clothes were in rags and through the holes, one could see limbs on which scarcely any flesh was left. The sunken, bead-like eyes set in most of the faces, were glazed like the eyes of dying men.

Some of the inmates who had the strength, put out their hands, pleading, without saying a word, for food. But others were too weak to do more than lean on the wire or against each other for support. Their lips moved but no sound came from them; they might have been mouthing appeals for help or, in delirium, chewing a non-existent meal. "We *must* help them," I said to Balodis. "Gather as much food as you can from the members of the party."

I found a little bread in my suitcase and flung it over the wire while Balodis went round gathering up all the scraps he could from the rest. The scramble for the scraps we threw over to the inmates was pitiful to see. Summoning up what little remained of their strength, they fought

like animals over bits of bread, or sausage, or a fragment of chocolate. In more than one case when a poor wretch had acquired a small scrap of food, the effort was so great that he could not lift it to his mouth but lay on the ground, clutching it to his breast as though he had secured a priceless jewel.

In the middle of this terrible scene, I heard a shout. The rest of the party fell back but I still had a few more scraps to throw over which had been given to me by the others. "Look out, Asja," snapped Balodis.

His tone was so sharp that I stopped at once and looked along the wire. Unnoticed by the party, a German soldier had advanced to within thirty yards and was now pointing his rifle at my head.

I jumped back in alarm. The German, a young brute in his early twenties, lowered his rifle and approached. "What do you think you are doing?" he demanded, adding a foul oath.

He seized me by the wrist and with a quick flick, threw me on the ground. "Stay there, you ———," he said, holding his bayonet a few inches from my chest.

But his truculence did not intimidate Balodis, who pushed his way through the crowd of indignant refugees and began to insult the German soldier. "What a brave fellow you are," he said, getting ready to ward off the bayonet if it should have been thrust in his direction instead of mine. "Your Fuehrer would be proud of you for threatening a helpless woman."

The rest of the party now moved forward in a body and the German, taking fright, backed away. I was on my feet in a second. Two or three more German guards arrived with bayonets drawn and in a short time, a mass of people, shouting and arguing, pressed against the barbed wire while those of the camp inmates capable of registering astonishment gaped at the scene.

Anything might have happened if the German *unter-offizier* in charge of the guard had not heard the commotion and rushed to the spot. His bewilderment at the sight of his men pinned in the middle of a band of people shouting threats in a foreign language would have been laughable in other circumstances. "What's going on?" he bellowed, thrusting himself pugnaciously into the crowd.

Hurriedly, I dived into my hand-bag and flourished my documents under his nose. "We are Latvian refugees

authorised to travel to Dresden," I said. "Why should these barbarians threaten us with their bayonets?"

The sergeant peremptorily requested more room so that he could examine the papers. "They seem to be in order," he said at last. "But why are you here, *fraulein*, instead of on a train bound for Dresden?"

"It seems to have escaped your notice that the R.A.F. have cut the railway," I said, sarcastically.

The sergeant nodded and turned to his somewhat sheepish men. "Get back to your posts," he ordered them. At that moment, one of the pathetic inmates of the camp found his tongue. "They are starving us to death," he said, in an old quavering voice that carried because it was so thin and high-pitched. "Do not let them murder us all."

The sergeant silenced this brave cry with a curse and ordered the victims to move away from the wire. "Go now, at once, *fraulein*," he said. "You have behaved foolishly in giving food to these people. You have behaved criminally. But be on your way. As for these," he nodded over his shoulder towards the people in the camp, "they will be dealt with in due course for their crimes."

I could not imagine how the prisoners could possibly have been made to suffer further and took the sergeant's words as an idle threat. I hope no one will think harshly of me when I say I was glad to obey his order. I wanted desperately to blot from my mind the sight I had seen. There was nothing we could do to mitigate the sufferings of these doomed prisoners, who tottered towards their huts, some walking backwards slowly and staring hopelessly beyond the wire into what they imagined to be a free world. For days we had considered ourselves ill-used outcasts whose days were sad, almost unbearable. As we pushed on down the avenue of tapering pines in the direction of Dresden, we realised that our misfortunes, harsh though they seemed, were trivial compared with the misfortunes of those on whom the Nazis really concentrated their vengeance.

DRESDEN, an ancient and sleepy provincial town, whose streets and buildings had a mellow charm I had seen nowhere else in my life, depressed me unutterably. Yet neither the city nor the people I met were to blame. The adjutant at the refugee reception centre could not have been more amiable. He paid no attention when one of his underlings reported to him that the number of refugees in my party did not tally with the number on the travel documents.

"Some additional refugees were added to your party at the last minute, eh, *fraulein*?" he said, accepting my explanation without question. "Well, I can understand that. In wartime, things cannot be correct down to the last detail. And they have been having a pretty bad time in Berlin."

I should have been delighted when he informed me that orders assigning me to a hospital in the city had been received and that the rest of the refugees would continue their journey to Dobrzani, a few miles from Prague, under another leader. "Of course, your mother and sisters will be allowed to stay with you," said the adjutant, with an unctuous smile. "In the Reich, we do not forget those who are loyal to us, especially when they come from another country."

Dresden or Dobrzani—what did it matter? It should not have done but it did. The truth was that although I was young and had plenty of vitality, my wanderings in the last year or two had begun to tire me. My store of what people call courage was getting low.

There was still hope in my heart that my father, brother and sister far away in Northern Europe would survive the maelstrom of war and that we should all be able to start life afresh somewhere. But in the meantime, I was weighed down by a heavy responsibility for the safety of my mother and sisters, who, I knew, would be doomed to suffer if my activities against either the Russians or the Germans ever came to light. It did not seem possible that the Germans could win the war. The Russians were advancing across Europe at a speed that astounded the

Nazi leaders and the growing power of Britain and the United States was demonstrated every day over the Reich. Who would reach us first? Our safety—our lives—depended on the answer to that question. All we could do was wait.

I soon discovered that the Nazis were not doing me a good turn by keeping me in Dresden. They were in dire need of every pair of skilled nursing hands they could get. We had arrived in Dresden at noon. Quarters were allocated to the family during the afternoon and I was ordered to report to a military hospital the same evening. There was no time for formalities; I was there to work. For the following 24 hours I was on duty in the operating theatre, where one after another, without a break, the mangled victims of the Russians were carried in. The beds were filled and then the spaces between the beds. Before dawn, the entire floor space of most of the wards was covered with wounded.

For a few days, nursing work kept me so busy that I had little time to brood over my personal anxieties. But as pressure eased somewhat, and I was allowed a little more time to myself, my old fears flowed back as strongly as a neap tide. I slept badly and often awoke in the night sweating and trembling.

It was not the daily sight of broken and grievously injured men that caused my plight—I had grown used to that long before. It was the thought that had become an obsession that one day the Nazis would catch up with me. I knew that taking a long view, the Russians were to be feared most. But the Nazis were still capable of terrible deeds against those who incurred their displeasure. I had seen for myself the victims of concentration camp treatment. I had learned much of the Nazi mentality and I was sure that as the war drew to its inevitable close, the blood-stained rulers would call for more blood and those who had been guilty of atrocious cruelty would redouble their efforts. If I were unlucky enough to be caught in this frenzy, my chances of survival would be negligible.

One afternoon when I was released from duty for a four-hour break, I walked into the city for a cup of *ersatz* coffee at a quiet hotel. In one of the main streets, I saw a Belgian named Pierre who had been in the party I had brought from Berlin. He was short and swarthy.

He had the furtive manner of a feeding rabbit but he was not as loud-mouthed with his complaints as some of his compatriots and seemed harmless enough.

He crossed the street as I approached and I wondered why he was still in Dresden when the others had left for Prague several days before.

An informer? If so, what had he found out on the trek from Leipzig to Dresden? There had been many small incidents that, pieced together in an unfriendly way, might have built into a formidable indictment against me. The time for instance when a good-looking young woman had loudly rejected the advances of one of the Latvians in the party. "I have a husband who is a soldier, not a deserter," she had shouted. The woman was quickly silenced but a spy in the party might have taken note of the remark and concluded that I knew deserters were in the party.

In my anxious state, I could not dismiss the presence in Dresden of Pierre entirely from my mind as I sat drinking my tasteless coffee and scanning a newspaper. Hope, according to Goebbels, was around the corner and the Fuehrer had conceived some majestic strategy that was to convert the retreat from the east into an advance against the Kremlin.

I was still searching the columns for some solid information about the war when the paper was slapped rudely to attract my attention and a grating voice said: "May I see your documents, *fraulein*?"

The familiar request always made my heart miss a beat but I hid my confusion and produced my papers for the two men dressed in black mackintoshes who stood before my chair. I knew at once they were Gestapo plain clothes men. So the presence of Pierre in Dresden had not been an accident!

The fatter of the two men glanced at my documents long enough to make certain that I was the person they wished to question. He handed them back to me. "*Fraulein*, you will come with us to headquarters. We want to ask you a few questions."

I knew it was hopeless to bluster at this stage and in a few minutes, I was standing in front of a slightly built officer. Outwardly I was self-possessed but secretly I shook with fright. The room in a military building was small and most of the space was taken up by a massive

desk. The officer sat in the only chair. The single picture on the wall was that of Hitler.

"To business, *fraulein*," said the officer, playing with his monocle when he had read my papers. "You will answer the questions I put to you truthfully and at once. Understand? I don't want to apply other methods and I don't want to waste time."

I began to protest at his manner and said that as a Latvian German, I had served the Germans in Riga and in Russia as well as in Germany itself as a nursing sister. "Unfortunately for you, those places are far away and we cannot check on your statements," he said.

"Then, *Herr Hauptmann*, how do you suggest that I came to be in possession of my papers?" I asked, bridleing.

The tiny smile vanished from the face of the dapper little man. "I will ask the questions, not you," he snapped.

The questions came thick and fast but I had the answers pat. Since war broke out and I had taken my stand against the invaders, I had told so many lies so often to various authorities that I had begun to believe most of them myself. All through my answers, I remembered to fulminate against the Russians as barbarians who had driven me from home. "Ring up the authorities in Danzig and Hamburg and they will confirm the details of my journey," I said. "The hospital in Dresden will tell you that my posting was regular and that I am working there."

I was in danger of being carried away by my own eloquence when the officer sent one of the men who had brought me in to telephone numbers in Hamburg and Danzig. "I believe you are working as a German nursing sister," he said, coldly. "I believe also that under cover of your uniform, you have been helping deserters from the Baltic States brigade of the S.S. to escape from their units."

I had been standing in his office for over an hour and felt faint but at this point I dare not ask for a drink of water. I feigned astonishment at his remark but I saw clearly how I was being drawn into a web that stretched all over Germany to lure people like me to destruction.

He opened a drawer and took out a photograph which

he threw down on the desk. "Do you know this man?" he asked, watching me closely.

I recognised at once a photograph of Balodis but spent some seconds pretending to scrutinise it, conscious that the Nazi's eyes were upon me all the time. "No," I said at last. "The face looks vaguely familiar but I can't place him."

The Nazi smiled mockingly and replaced the photograph. "You ought to know him," he said, with a sneer. "He is from Riga, too, and travelled in your party to Dresden."

I shrugged my shoulders and although in a corner, remembered not to protest too much. It could do me no good and might do both Balodis and me harm. "I cannot be expected to vouch for everybody who travelled in the party," I said, trying to appear reasonable. "I did not organise it. I simply obeyed orders to act as a courier."

My two great fears now were that Balodis had been captured and that I would be given the full Nazi treatment of torture. Balodis, I knew, would never have betrayed me, however much they had tortured him but others might not have been so strong-willed. I was far from sure about my own reactions to deliberately inflicted pain. In the three years the war had been in progress for me, my greatest fear had never been death but the torture which both the Reds and the Nazis applied when it suited them. In the long nights, and in the daytime when I had seen victims whisked off to the torture chambers in Riga, I had often wondered how any ordinary woman could stand up to crude brutality, without losing all dignity. Could it be that I was now to be put to the test?

The door opened and I made way to allow the Gestapo man who had been sent to telephone, to squeeze into the room. He left the door open, purposely I think, so that I could see a woman being frog-marched down the corridor by two men, the same size as my own guards. Her screams were blood-curdling as one of her captors twisted her arm mercilessly behind her back in a half-nelson lock. She had passed the door when I looked out and I could not see her face but her hat had fallen off and her hair was disordered. "Shut the door, *fraulein*," said my interrogator, slyly.

The woman's screams still echoed down the corridor

and I braced myself for what was to come. The two Nazis held a conversation in low whispers, and the man in charge looked up. "Do you swear that you have never at any time helped a Latvian deserter to escape?" he said.

I looked him full in the face and dug my fingers deeply into the palms of my hands to force myself to answer his question calmly. "Of course," I lied, as calmly as I could. "I don't know any deserters. If I did, I should not help them. Their duty is to fight."

I did not say whom they should fight and the little man did not notice the slip. He polished his monocle and put it into his eye-socket. "For the time being, I shall accept what you say, *fraulein*," he said, after a long pause. "We have just confirmed that your name is known to the authorities in Berlin." He rose and came round the desk. "Now you had better be off to your hospital duties. I am glad for your sake that the investigation has turned out well."

He clicked his heels and made a small bow. Even with his monocle in place to give him the superficial appearance of a civilised man, he looked like a cold-blooded killer.

Dismissed, I found my own way through the snowing streets to the hospital—the transport of the Gestapo was apparently needed for the more urgent task of bringing in further suspects. I had no idea how long I had been in suspense at the Gestapo headquarters or how long it took me to reach the hospital. I was not conscious of the keenness of the January air nor of the need to talk to another human being. They say that in Italy when Vesuvius erupts and the peasants who live near its slopes find themselves still alive when the lava stops falling out, wild scenes of jubilation and love-making take place. I felt thankfulness but not jubilation. But then, my battle was against ruthless Nazis not against ruthless Nature.

I sat in the sisters' room at the hospital heedless of the chatter around me, thinking of nothing except my escape, until another sister warned me that it was time to go on duty again. Fortunately for me, the need to work stirred my numbed faculties and I plunged into routine as part of a body of people that sought to ease suffering and give life, rather than inflict the one and take away the other.

Late that night a heavy air raid devastated and burned the old town. By mischance the hospital was practically

obliterated and only a few of us, who managed to reach the shelters in time, survived.

Spring had come once more, and spring, which carpets the high hills all around Dobrzani with delightful alpine flowers, gives the little town a shining face. The trees lining the streets burst with blossom and the gardens of the gaily painted villas begin to reveal treasures that have been kept safe by the winter snow.

Prague is a few miles away but no one in Dobrzani thinks of Prague in spring-time when there is scent-laden air to sniff and long walks on friendly hills to give back health and hope after the dreariness of winter. Even in wartime, the weariest began to think of life and hope again on the slopes that dominate Dobrzani.

I had come to Dobrzani sick of the past and apprehensive of the future. The Gestapo had acquitted me unaccountably on the slender evidence of a telephone call but there were no means of knowing whether they were adopting a cat-and-mouse policy and would pounce again soon. If the Gestapo did not lay their hands on me, it seemed certain that the Russians would. Whatever the result of the war, all knew it was unlikely that we Latvians, who found ourselves in this lovely, picture-post-card corner of Europe, would see the great forests and austere landscape of our homeland again for a long time.

Dobrzani had been my original destination when I left Berlin, and within a few days of the destruction of a large part of Dresden, I was told at the commandant's office to be ready to leave at short notice. The Nazis had decided that refugees of many nationalities should be concentrated in the area around the border between Czechoslovakia and the former Sudetenland and my mother and sisters had already gone there with other refugees from Danzig.

But while I was packing the commandant sent for me again. "We have a patient who must be moved immediately to Munich," he said. "He is of the highest rank. I have detailed two doctors to take him there by ambulance and you will go with them."

The journey took all day and it was very late at night before we deposited the unconscious general in a military hospital and turned for home. There was little the doctors could do and hardly anything to be done in the way of nursing. The general was dying from severe head injuries

and I prayed more than once that he would not die before we reached Munich. The hospital commandant was obviously satisfied with my experience or he would not have sent me. But the Gestapo had a habit of linking unlikely events and unlikely people in any way that suited them. They had recently questioned me and still undoubtedly suspected me of treasonable activities. What would have been easier, supposing the general had died, than to have accused me of dereliction of duty, and had me shot? I had heard of cases where that happened and it was not far-fetched to imagine myself embroiled in such a plot.

A day later I was on my way to Czechoslovakia but the train services were chaotic and I had to spend several days in a Leipzig transit camp for medical staff. I was in a depressed frame of mind, worried about my family, worried about Balodis and other underground leaders and worried, too, about myself.

Walking in the street one day, glancing backwards without appearing to do so—a habit that had become second nature—I was soon aware that I was being followed on the other side of the road. I thought immediately that the Gestapo were shadowing me and concluded that if it were so, I should be wise not to try to shake them off since they could find me at any time they chose.

A small, select-looking café seemed a good place to wait and I took a table where I could watch the door. A few minutes later to my horror, a man who had been in the party from Berlin entered and sat down opposite me. He had been friendly with Balodis who seemed to trust him and my immediate reaction was to protect him. "You must leave at once," I whispered, before he had time to speak. "I am being followed by the Gestapo."

The man laughed. "From the other side of the road?" he asked, and when I nodded, he laughed again. "That was not the Gestapo. I was your shadow."

I breathed a sigh of relief and began to talk to him. "You must find Balodis at once," I said, as we sipped our coffee. "The Gestapo in Dresden have his photograph. They are looking for him and he must be warned."

"Perhaps you would care to do it yourself?" he said.

Before I could answer, he darted from the café and returned, while the coffee was still warm, with Balodis himself, dressed in the uniform of a German sergeant. He had grown a moustache and looked smart and spruce.

"My leave papers are in perfect order," he said, gaily, slapping his breast pocket. "I am Sergeant Otto Schultz of the *Wehrmacht*, on leave because of bombing at home."

He teased me a little when I urged him to take care and said that he knew all about the Gestapo's efforts to find him. "I can tell you, Asja," he said, becoming serious. "If you had been detained in the Gestapo headquarters much longer at Dresden there would have been trouble. I was waiting outside with a party of four patriots to storm the building and get you out."

My spirits rose, as they always did in his calming presence. Like myself, he was on his way to the Prague area. "I hear that the locality is full of our patriots and other foreign refugees who are living in the forests just as they did in the old days," he said. "Not only that. The Czechs have an underground and there are quite a lot of the Wlasov Army."

"The Wlasov Army?"

"Yes, they are Russians who broke away from the Reds. They will join with anybody to fight the Communists."

The picture seemed confused and I said that our difficulty in the last days of the struggle was going to be sorting out our friends from our enemies. The problem, however, seemed to present no difficulty to Balodis. "This is how to look at it," he said. "We Latvians hate the Germans but we fear the Russians more. The Wlasov Army hate the Russians and do not give a button for the Germans. The Czechs hate the Germans more than they fear the Russians. The Western Allies hate the Germans and are suspicious of the Russians. The Russians hate everybody."

We enjoyed a wry laugh at this analysis and after giving Balodis details of the hospital to which I was posted in Dobrzani, we said a sad good-bye again.

Spring had not yet arrived when I saw Dobrzani for the first time. The winter snow lay thick both on the slopes of the hills and in the valleys and the blustering winds cut through our cloaks, though they were made of thick, grey cloth. But the forbidding climate was warm and friendly compared with the attitude of the Czechs in the district to the Germans.

I had my first experience of the bitter feelings of the Czechs as soon as I arrived. Alighting from the train, I twisted my ankle when I slipped in the slush. The pain was intense. I had a few miles to travel to the hospital and in a matter of moments I could not walk. Several Czech railway policemen answered my request for help but said they knew no first aid. I looked like being left in the station for ever but a German officer discovered that a Czech doctor had a surgery about a mile away and commandeered a horse-sledge to take me there.

I was cold, miserable and in agony but I was even more concerned because I knew that my papers had gone ahead and that I was expected at the hospital that evening. Things would look extremely black for me if I did not turn up when I was expected.

The Czech doctor was out and his surgery closed. Everyone said unhelpfully that they did not know when he would be back but the driver of the sledge insisted that I should be allowed to wait in a nearby guest-house until the doctor returned. When I hobbled with difficulty into the sitting-room, the Czechs there took one look at my uniform and gave me the most venomous looks.

Fortunately the sledge-driver stayed with me and when the doctor returned an hour later, forced him to attend to my ankle in spite of the doctor's protests that he must go out again at once. The doctor, a round-faced, good-looking man, snarled his questions rather than spoke them.

"A German nursing sister, I see," he said. I did not answer except to wince with pain. "Where are you bound for?" I told him I had been posted to the hospital at Dobrzani.

"A Nazi hospital for mental cases," he grunted. "I wish you luck."

I managed to ask him what he meant. "I know better than to answer questions from people like you," he said grimly. "You are all Nazis."

"I am from Latvia," I said.

"Then why didn't you stay in your own country instead of following the Nazis around?" he said. I was in too much pain to argue with the man.

The hospital at Dobrzani was indeed a mental hospital and the Czechs, believing that only ardent Nazis worked there, shunned the staff and patients alike. But it was

more than merely a mental hospital. Many of the patients were wounded soldiers and when I had been there a few weeks and had explored the extensive and beautiful grounds, I discovered that many of the patients were soldiers of all the nationalities who had been impressed to fight for the Nazis, including those of the Baltic States regiments. The hospital was full to overflowing and once I had been screened, I was accepted as a German nursing sister, with such privileges and duties as the rank carried, including that of slaving 12 hours a day and possibly more.

I had left the sick bay and had been working at the hospital for a little more than a month when I had first-hand experience of Hitler's utterly ruthless methods of prosecuting his war.

After a short spell among the mental patients, I was transferred temporarily to a wing which contained wounded men and, arriving for duty early one morning, I found the entire floor in a state of turmoil. The young nurses were scurrying about, dusting, cleaning and ordering the patients to tidy up their few belongings. Some of the patients were little more than boys—far younger than my own brother—whose nerve had failed them at the front. In order to gain a few weeks' respite, they had given themselves "blighty" wounds and were in hospital for nothing more serious than toes or fingers shot off. With the resilience of youth, they soon recovered their spirits and the ward was as cheerful as any in the hospital.

I asked what was happening and a young German lad called out cheerfully: "A brass-hat is to visit us, *fraulein*. Maybe he will send us home on leave."

The doctor in charge called me to his office and amplified the lad's statement. "This is not an ordinary brass-hat, *fraulein*," he said in a low voice. "We have word that the *Fuehrer* himself is coming but no one is to know that until he actually arrives." This was quite feasible since Berchtesgaden was less than two hours' drive away.

The official cavalcade appeared towards noon and came to our ward soon after. Hitler wore a long field coat and swept through the building flanked by an imposing escort of officers and doctors. Once or twice he stopped to chat to badly wounded soldiers who were able to sit up. From my position at the rear of the procession, I had a good view of his lined and sallow face, as he snapped ques-

tions and scarcely paused long enough to hear the answers. The *Fuehrer* was plainly in a hurry to reach his next appointment.

He walked up one side of the ward and down the other in a hurricane of movement and with quick hand-shakes all round, left the white-coated doctors to enter his car. But on the steps, his roving eye caught sight of three ambulances speeding away down the hospital drive. He turned back.

"Where are those ambulances going?" he rasped.

Dr. Muller, a Sudeten German who was a strict disciplinarian and a first-class doctor, screwed up his eyes at the convoy. "They have probably come from the front, *mein Fuehrer*," he said, observing the mud-spattered condition of the vehicles. "It often happens nowadays. This is one of the hospitals nearest the front but we have no more beds. They will be going further back to find a hospital that can take the wounded."

Hitler's face suddenly blazed with a madman's fury. "You have no room? Yet you have lightly wounded men here?"

He seized Muller roughly by the arm and shook him. "To your office," he ordered.

The cavalcade returned to the ward for a few brief minutes and Hitler reappeared on the steps again, his face aglow. The handshakes and quick congratulations were repeated. Then re-entering the car, Hitler sped away like a noisy gust of wind.

Muller waited until he was out of sight and turned wearily into the ward office once again. He dismissed most of the other doctors with him but beckoned me to follow him into the room. He passed his hand over his eyes as if to shut out a fearsome sight but pulled himself together after a moment. He took a list of patients and handed it to me with a hopeless gesture.

"There are ticks beside six names, *fraulein*," he said, slowly. "Tell these men to dress themselves in tunics and trousers. No caps. No belts. No boots. Tell them to be at the entrance of the ward in five minutes."

"What reason shall I give them, *Herr Kommandant*?" I asked.

"Tell them. . . ." He paused for a moment. "Tell them . . . nothing. It is better that they should not know until the last minute."

I looked at the doctor's unutterably sad face and then I knew. I looked down the list and back again at the doctor. "Go on, *fraulein*," he said, firmly but not unkindly.

In the ward, the soldiers were still chattering excitedly about the visit of their beloved *Fuehrer*. "He said to me . . ." a man was telling his comrades.

By a chance, all six men—no, they were all boys—were together at one end of the ward. They probably came from the same regiment, the same local Hitler Youth, the same school. I stood at the foot of a bed and called out their names: "Katz, Henwecke, Schmidt. . . ."

Schmidt was the flaxen-haired lad who had hoped that the visitor would give them all leave passes for home. "Has it come off, *fraulein*?" he asked, eagerly. "Has the *Fuehrer* given us leave?"

I could not bring myself to look at their excited faces. "Put on your tunic and trousers, Schmidt and the others," I said, dully. "No caps . . . no belts . . . be at the entrance in five minutes."

I walked slowly down the ward to wait for them and found that a dozen men in charge of an *unteroffizier* were waiting, too. They had rifles and their faces were grim and wooden.

The lads came chattering gaily like excited schoolboys, eager to find out what was in store for them. But when they saw the guard, their faces went white and jests died on their trembling lips. I leaned against the door-post and covered my face as they marched away. I forgot they were of the Master-race, which I hated, and my heart filled with compassion for them. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"The *Fuehrer* ordained that they should die, *fraulein*," said Dr. Muller. "If we did not pass on the order, we should die, too."

The shots rang out while we were standing there, just before the gong announced that the meagre lunch was ready to serve.

The entire area for miles around the hospital was filled, as Balodis had said, with men who had two objects in taking to the forests: to avoid fighting for the Germans and to stay alive. The Germans knew they were there and if they had not been so hard-pressed, there is no

doubt the forests would have been mopped up more ruthlessly. As it was, the job was entrusted to home guards and second line troops, who left the forests severely alone but lay in wait in the villages for wretches who were forced out to search for almost non-existent food.

Balodis appeared in my life again almost as soon as I had recovered from my wrenched ankle. The situation, he reported, was disastrous, although he admitted that his intelligence service was not working very well. His failure to contact me for some weeks had caused him anxiety and he was relieved when the explanation was nothing more serious than that I had been in bed with my damaged ankle.

When I first went to Dobrzani, I found my mother and sisters living in a guest-house at Petersdorf, a suburb of the ancient town of Trautenau. But as soon as I secured a villa in the hospital grounds, they came to live with me. Balodis was a frequent visitor and we often strolled up and down the gentle hill slopes, discussing plans. Balodis was living in a guest-house for refugees in a small village not far from the hospital and had assumed some sort of official position as a representative of the Latvian Government!

"The war is coming to an end," he explained, "and anyway, Berlin is a long way away. No one has the time to check on me."

Balodis and others who were looked on as leaders of the Latvians, were greatly concerned about the physical state of some of the men who had spent the bitter winter in the forests. "Hunger will defeat us," he said. "This area will become a battle-field shortly but by then, we shall have died of starvation, unless. . . ."

I prompted him. "Unless?"

"I do not like to involve you again, Asja," he said.

I urged him to continue and he unfolded a plan that he thought might save the lives of a few of the more seriously-affected Latvians. Balodis knew the set-up at the hospital—the over-crowded conditions, the over-worked staff, the constant comings-and-goings of patients to other hospitals. "The hospital has food of a sort and it has shelter—it is the only place with them both around here," said Balodis. "Now, if we could get a few of our men into the hospital . . . even a week or so might make all the difference between whether they live or die."

We paused at the top of the hill to admire the peaceful scenery. "Do they suffer from shell-shock?" I asked.

Balodis looked puzzled. "Shell-shock," I repeated. "There are several wards full of shell-shock cases. I think I could get a transfer to one of the wards and arrange for the admission of some of our friends."

Dr. Muller, the hospital head, had a large villa near mine in the hospital grounds. He raised no difficulties when I met him at the gate one day and asked for a transfer to a ward for shell-shocked men. "I want to do a little nursing for a change," I explained.

The ward I was assigned to was large and on the ground floor. Its inmates suffered in varying degrees and as I knew, there were foreign as well as German soldiers. Some of the violent cases were restrained in cots covered by strong fish netting but the rest usually lay about, shaken by spasms and twitching and mouthing when they were not staring fixedly and mindlessly into space.

I appointed myself to take charge of admissions and soon found that the doctors were far too busy to give attention to any but the most serious cases. They looked at the records and if there was no violent change in a patient's condition, they passed on. A minute for each patient was as much as they could spare.

The first admission of a Latvian patriot took place at night, though later we became bolder and exploited the possibilities of day-time admissions. A batch of the more lightly-shocked men had been sent back to the front and their beds were to be filled on the following day. As soon as I could contact Balodis, I told him of the arrangement. "If you can have two men at the ward door at 10 o'clock tonight, I will do what I can for them," I said.

That night, shaking slightly from fright, I sat writing up notes in the sister's office and wondering whether the notice I had given Balodis was too short. I was wondering, too, whether the plan, about which I had been so confident in the broad daylight, would after all be workable. Only a few dim lights burned in the ward; there had been no air raid that night to disturb the patients, who, except for occasional moanings and threshings, were quiet.

Exactly at ten o'clock, I put down my pen and went to the outer door. I opened it no more than a fraction and shut it quickly when I squeezed outside. The patrols were

fussy about blackout and the smallest chink of light might bring them running.

The air seemed sharp although the ward was not overheated. I stood on the steps and thought of what I would say if a guard appeared instead of Balodis' men. The easiest explanation of my presence outside would be the best—I was taking a breath of air. But I prayed there would be no guard and no slips of any sort; I could not afford to be involved in anything that would draw the attention of the authorities to me.

Two minutes passed. Three minutes. I thought with disappointment that the notice I had given Balodis must have been too short. But just as I turned to go, I heard a slight movement by the side of the step. "Who is there?" I asked, in a whisper.

"Friends," said a voice in Latvian and two shadowy figures appeared at my side. "Come quickly and quietly," I ordered.

The men were pathetically grateful when I led them into the building. They were both in their early thirties and had the pallor and quick, jerky movements of men who had been on the run for some time. I had seen the condition often in Riga but even there, men on the run were not as thin as these two.

I had a pair of pyjamas ready for each and told them to take off their own clothes, which I hid in a cupboard. In a few quick words, I explained what they were to do but Balodis had already instructed them carefully. "You have shell-shock," I said to one of the men. "Show me how it affects you."

The series of convulsions and face twitchings that he went through immediately was so comic that I could hardly help laughing. "You must be careful not to overdo it," I warned them both, "especially when the doctors are about. Do nothing to make them suspicious. Your best plan is to pretend that your speech is affected as well as your mind. Do not talk too much. Just rest and keep as warm as you can."

I led them one after the other to their beds and later in the night, hung medical charts showing their supposed symptoms at the foot of their beds. The next morning, the doctor in charge for the day examined the men perfunctorily and passed on. In peacetime hospital patients are

often only cyphers to their doctors but in war, they cannot expect to be more than anonymous bodies.

It did not seem to enter any of the doctors' heads that the men might have no right to be there. I suppose they took it for granted that somebody competent must have admitted them, since they were in the hospital, properly documented.

At any rate, the two men were the first of many Latvians who were admitted and rested for a while under the noses of the Germans. They then returned to the forests and were replaced by others in need of a similar rest. The two beds I secured for the exclusive use of Latvians grew to six and by the time I left the hospital, more than a dozen beds, with constantly changing occupants, were always at the disposal of the partisans. It became too complicated to think of new names and in time I adopted the simple system of transferring the identity and condition of shock from the man leaving to the newcomer. In a ward for shell-shocked patients, faces and names did not matter to the staff.

I do not pretend that, when I thought about it, this state of affairs did not give me considerable anxiety. No one knew better than I the risk involved and the penalty that would follow discovery. There were times, too, when I even had qualms about my own position among the German medical staff, who accepted me as a Baltic German and treated me as an equal, before whom there were no secrets. But whenever I was troubled by such thoughts, I remembered that the Germans had not scrupled to rape my country and scatter its peace-loving inhabitants all over Europe. If their conscience was clear, why should mine be troubled? The system seemed simple enough and fool-proof but one day I was petrified to discover that I was not the only person who had thought of it. Passing along the covered corridor connecting the wards, I was waylaid by a patient who had been hovering near the swing door. He spoke to me in bad German and I asked him brusquely what he wanted.

"I am not what you think I am," he said.

"Who are you, then?" I asked sarcastically, thinking I was dealing with a lunatic. "Herr Hitler? Or perhaps only

The man, who was thin and going grey at the temples, laughed in a deprecating way. "No, no, it is not that," he

said. "I do not think you are German and that is why I dare speak to you. I am not a German either. I am an Englishman."

His words frightened me and suspecting a trap of some sort, I pushed past him. "I cannot listen to you," I said.

When I met Balodis on the way home, I told him what had happened. Balodis' face grew grave. "I don't say he is not telling the truth," he said, after discussion. "He may be an Englishman. If we have smuggled Latvians into the hospital, others may have done the same for him. The Czechs, for example."

We walked along in silence for a time. "What is really worrying, Asja, is that he should think you are not German. If he is English, it does not matter much. But if he is *not*, we shall have to do some hard and quick thinking."

Balodis' view was that since the man had approached me once without success, he would do so again and that I must ask him for proof that he was English. If the proof was forthcoming, it might still be a trap but the possibility was smaller.

The man did waylay me again on the following day and I learnt his story more by guessing than understanding his execrable German. He was a British army major who had escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp. He was making his way blindly through Czechoslovakia to either the British or American lines but the bad weather and lack of food had forced him to change his plans. "Czech patriots hid me and brought me to this lunatic asylum as the safest place. But now that the weather is better and I am rested, I should like to be on my way," he said.

"Why not ask your Czech friends to help you?" I said.

The man replied that it would be the sensible way out but his Czech friends had disappeared. "I can prove that what I say is true," he said earnestly. "If you will help me, I will never forget. When the war is over, I will search Europe to thank you."

His voice had a ring of sincerity but I remembered that if he was a Gestapo agent, it would be his job to sound sincere. "How can you prove your story?" I asked.

Half a mile from the hospital gates, the man said, was a clump of pine trees standing in a field. Under the one nearest the road, his British battle-dress jacket was buried. "The crown on the shoulder will prove that I am a British major," he asserted. "In the jacket pocket you will find

letters and photographs. Look at the pictures. You will identify me in a group with my wife and children—though of course, I am much thinner now than I was."

I nodded and without promising help or committing myself in any way, passed along the corridor. I had been careful not to admit that I was not a German and had covered myself so far in case a trap had been set. But I was inclined to believe this strange story, knowing how easy it had been for me to install Latvians in the hospital.

There was another point. So far, there had been none of the subtle blackmail a seasoned Gestapo agent would probably have applied, especially if he knew who I really was—"help me, or else." All that the patient had done was to take a chance and plead for my help.

The following day on my afternoon off, I decided to test his story. It was fine and I urged my mother and sister to take a stroll with me in the direction of the hospital. The pine trees were there, just as the major had described, and the place was deserted. "Let us pick a few flowers," I said, climbing the hedge.

The trees were less than a hundred yards distant and I approached with a faint feeling of apprehension. I had said nothing to the others about the real reason for our walk and while they picked posies of spring flowers, I began to scabble the loose soil with my foot. A few swift movements showed that *something* was buried. I looked around to make sure that no stranger was in sight.

"Come and help us, Asja," called my mother.

But I was on my knees disinterring the battle-dress, which as the patient had said, carried a tattered crown on the shoulder. Looking around again, I felt in the pocket and took out a bundle of mouldering letters but nothing else.

They prove nothing, I thought, impatiently. I tried the other pocket. Sure enough, it contained a number of photographs, carefully wrapped in a waterproof cover. The major had not lied and I recognised him clearly in several of the snapshots.

"Asja," scolded my mother, when she came on the scene. "You are up to no good. You will be the death of us all, yet."

I reported my find to Balodis and gave him the photographs to examine. Balodis was satisfied that they came from England. The Latvians with him were powerless

to help but Balodis was in touch with the strong Czech underground in the district. "He is an ally," he reflected, "and I am sure that when the war is finished, Britain will help us to drive the Russians from our country."

A few days later, the Englishman waylaid me in the corridor again and asked whether I had assured myself that his story was true. "If you can reach the pine trees at dusk tomorrow evening without being followed, you may meet people who are willing to help you," I told him.

The man clasped my hand but dropped it quickly when we heard footsteps approaching along the corridor. "I shall never forget," he said gratefully. "May God bless you and look after you." I did not tell him that a strongly armed band would be observing the position all day in case of a plot and that he would be the first to be shot down at a sign that anything was amiss.

All next day and the following day, I could not get out of my mind the image of a man who, though he had suffered so much, was willing to risk everything in order to join the fight again.

"The Englishman?" said Balodis when I next saw him. "Yes, the Czechs confirmed that his story was genuine. They gave him clothes and arms and a little food. Yes," said Balodis with a sigh, "he has gone off all right, though God knows how he will fare or how far he will get."

THE closer the war drew to Dobrzani, the more jittery everybody became and the wilder the rumours that passed from mouth to mouth. I gathered all the information I could for Balodis from the Germans but it always seemed to be too late to be of much use. The first we knew at the hospital of further German reverses was when the casualties began to pour in.

The plight of the Latvians and other foreigners in the area was indeed unenviable. While the Germans still held on, they were hunted without mercy. The same fate awaited anyone found giving succour to them—or suspected of it. But, if the Russians arrived first, the guerrillas who in many cases had aided the Russians by sabotaging the Germans were in a more desperate position still. Hungry, suffering from exposure, and with hope deferred, the men in the forests needed an iron will to live.

I was fearful of the consequences, yet I could not stand aside and see brave men die, though there was tragically little I could do. Food was shorter than I had ever known it before. Even at the hospital, small loaves had to be divided into sixteen portions and patients crowded round the serving board for the few crumbs left behind. Occasionally I could steal a little soup, which I would put into a canister and take under my cloak for Baltic States partisans who were hiding in various houses in the village.

I arrived home one evening with some purloined soup which I intended to give to a young Czech woman for two or three Estonian deserters hiding in her cellar. The woman had a warm heart and later had to give up her activities because of the animosity of other villagers, who classed all foreigners as Nazi and hated them all.

But she saw things in a different light and for a long time she did not turn away any who needed help.

Food was shorter in her house than anywhere else because there were always so many mouths to feed and since she often took in deserters I brought, I tried whenever I could to supplement her supply. "Take this canister of soup over to Auntie Dobzin's house," I said to my little

nephew Nikolai. "It is for the uncles who are staying with her."

The Czechs had begun to watch every movement I made in the village and I often used the lad for errands. "Soup, Auntie Asja?" he said, licking his lips. "Can I have some of it?"

His face was so forlorn that I had to steel my heart. "No, Nikolai, you may not," I said. "You had soup for lunch and you had sausage for tea. The soup is for uncles who have had nothing all day." It went against the grain to deny a child what he could have eaten but I knew he was not starving and that the men across the road in the cellars were. Nikolai took my decision with a pathetic little smile. Although only eight, the lad had learned to accept many of the hard facts of war-time life on the road from Riga to Dobrzani.

Food was never far from our thoughts in those dreadful days and my mother often joined with my sisters in arguing that I should not give food away when the family was on short rations. But I always convinced them that, though we were badly off, there were others whose needs were far greater.

I stole food from the hospital without compunction but the time came when there was none left to steal. Patients were on a diet of spinach soup—a handful of spinach in a very large bowl of water—and protests that it was uneatable or not sustaining enough were ignored. "Let everybody get out into the hospital grounds and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine," said one of the Nazi women doctors when I told her of complaints. "It will do them just as much good as vitamins."

Hunger is easy enough to bear after the first torturing pangs have passed and only the smell of cooking can renew the insensate craving for food. Not much cooking was done and we had become adept at mastering hunger. It was something we accepted as inevitable, like the need to wash, or the senseless shoutings of disordered patients. The doctors did all they could to ward off the effects of hunger and malnutrition by giving the nursing staff daily injections of glucose. "You need your strength or you will not be able to work," said Dr. Muller. So, for the final month at Dobrzani, though I ate no more than two meals a week like the rest, I was able to carry on working without much trouble.

Food had often caused argument in the family but what frightened my mother, poor soul, even more, was the fact that I often hid uniforms and guns, stolen from the hospital, in the cellar of the villa. "You'll get us all shot, Asja," she would lament.

The frequent appearance of home guards in the village made her panic and more than once I arrived home to find her cutting a precious uniform into small pieces and stuffing them into our tiny stove. It was useless to blame her. At the beginning of the war in Riga, such a thing would never have happened. But privation had aged her and though she seldom referred to her lost husband and children, I could tell that she suffered much in the privacy of her room. The wonder was that she remained as well and cheerful as she did.

Towards the end of our life in our villa at Dobrzani, my mother never felt safe when I was in the house and, when I was outside, I was never sure that I should not be enmeshed in a scheme to help Latvian patriots.

Balodis designed a number of safeguards. Anyone he sent accosted me with the words "Are you the daughter of the mother of seven children?" But some Latvians had no introduction from Balodis and if they could speak fluent Latvian, I had to take them on trust and hope they were not Nazi agents posing as refugees.

The battle against the advancing Russians drew nearer still and the question of what should be done assumed greater importance than food as a topic. For, whether we lived, or went to slavery and perished, depended on whether the Germans held out until the Americans came.

My mother did not like the thought of leaving me at the hospital but she had made up her mind that it was folly to stay in the district any longer. I urged her to depart on the strength of reports at the hospital that the Russians were only a few miles away and was relieved one day when she accepted my advice. "Take little Nikolai and make for Pilsen to contact the Americans while there is still time," I said. "The Germans are too hard-pressed to worry about you and the Czechs dare do nothing yet. In a few days' time it will be different, but by then I will be with you."

We had come to the parting of the ways once more but this time my mother did not weep as we said goodbye. I

watched her stride off bravely on her long walk, carrying a few things in a large shopping bag and clasping her grandson Nikolai firmly by the hand. A short time later, my sisters followed, one by one. They had agreed to rendezvous a mile or two up the road to avoid creating suspicion.

That evening, when it was dark, I put all my forged passes and other documents except my identity card into a bottle and buried it in a corner of the garden. I was now a German nursing sister and nothing else. The Russians would, I hoped, accept me as a German, which would give me some sort of chance of escaping banishment and death in Siberia. But if I fell into the hands of the Americans, I believed I could quickly convince them of my real nationality. Short of taking to the road and risking arrest, I believed I had done all I could to save my neck.

Life seemed a good deal emptier when my mother and sisters had gone but work at the hospital went on unremittingly. The wounded continued to pour in and the madmen, crazed with hunger, grew madder. Some of them held us responsible for the lack of food and we dare not rest or go on duty except in twos, for fear of attack. Rumours continued to fly like leaves in autumn winds: the Russians were over the other side of the hill; they were five miles away; the Germans were holding out; the Americans were advancing; the Russians would arrive next morning. We listened, shrugged our shoulders at each rumour and went on with our work.

But one day, the Russians *did* arrive in the district and their arrival was so unexpected after the uncertainty that we were all taken by surprise. Dobrzani was nearly overrun and almost without the firing of a shot, it was in the hands of the Czech underground.

I knew now that my hour of destiny was near. In spite of all my carefully arranged plans, I was tempted to take my coat and belatedly follow my family down the road to Pilsen in a frantic attempt to meet the Americans. But I knew too that, for the moment, such a course would be mad. The Russians might have by-passed the hospital but if they were in the district and on top, the Czechs would certainly be guarding all the roads to the West.

The Czechs soon showed their hands around the hospital. I knew, as I have no doubt the Germans did, that among the Czechs who worked in the hospital were many

underground workers. The Nazis had held their country down by force for many years but the Czech spirit had never been entirely subdued and their hostility constantly broke through a veneer of servility and co-operation.

The underground workers now came out. They were the stokers and orderlies, the gardeners and storekeepers. They left their usual tasks and strolled about arrogantly in their shirt sleeves; they openly peered through windows at the doctors and sisters at work. They lounged mockingly in doorways, with cigarettes dangling; they said nothing but their attitude made it all too clear that they knew they were the new masters.

A loud-speaker announcement that could be heard all over the hospital chilled me. "Comrades, the Russian liberators have arrived," said a voice first in German and then in a variety of languages. "The Nazis are defeated. Our first task will be to repatriate you to your own home lands. We shall see to it that you are restored to your flats and houses and to your old jobs. The victorious Red Army has freed you from your Nazi oppressors."

I was listening with considerably mixed feelings to this announcement when an orderly appeared and requested my presence in the Commandant's office. "And," said the orderly, who was in a state of great agitation himself, "it is not the Commandant who wants to see you, *fraulein*."

I was glad of the friendly warning and as soon as I neared the Commandant's office, I saw why the orderly was nervous. The door was guarded by two armed Czech soldiers in blue uniforms who were glaring in an intimidating manner at all comers.

Inside the office, flanked by two Russian soldiers with rifles, a young, pale Russian lieutenant with a cap held in position by his jutting ears, was seated in the Commandant's chair, while Muller himself stood stiffly to attention near the door. One of the two Czech soldiers in the room pointed his revolver at Muller's head, while the other moved over to cover me.

I guessed at once what was happening. "Remember I am a German," I muttered to Dr. Muller as I passed him.

The Commandant paid no attention to me and I doubted whether he had heard what I had said or, if he

had heard, whether he would understand the reason for the remark. So far as he was concerned, there had never been any question about my nationality.

But Dr. Muller had heard and had understood. He did not look at me as the Russian said in an arrogant tone: "Your nationality?"

"I am a German."

The Russian turned to Dr. Muller. "What is the nationality of this sister?"

"She is German," said Muller.

The Russian pounded the desk with his fist as he snatched my identity card out of my hand. "Our information is different," he said.

I plucked up my courage, knowing that I had one ally in the room in Dr. Muller. "Then your information is wrong," I said.

The lieutenant glowered at the card and said rapidly in Russian to one of the Czechs: "Are you sure this is the woman?" he said.

"So I was told," said the Czech.

The Russian turned again to me. "If you are a German," he said, "explain to me why you have been more friendly with people from the Baltic States than with Germans."

I knew my liberty might depend on the answer. "I have been friendly with everyone," I said, as calmly as I could. "I am a German nurse, nothing more. I have been friendly with people from the Baltic States, because I have nursed there."

My words had some effect on the Russian, who looked to Muller for confirmation of my statement.

If Muller felt any surprise at what must have been to him a remarkable accusation, it did not show on his craggy face. I glanced from the Russian to the German, hardly daring to breathe. The German cleared his throat.

"The *fraulein* is a German," he said in a low, clear voice. "What she says is true. I have known her since the earliest days of the war and there has never been any suggestion that she is other than German."

The Russian strummed and grimaced. He was obviously taken aback by Dr. Muller's statement. In any other circumstances, I have little doubt that I should have been bundled off to NKVD headquarters for further interrogation. But the Russians had arrived so recently

that their forces were not yet properly organised and the little Russian hardly knew what to do.

While my fate hung delicately on the decision of a young Russian, the door of the office burst open. The Russian soldiers were so startled at the interruption that they raised their rifles and the Czechs took menacing steps nearer Dr. Muller and myself. They seemed immensely relieved when they saw it was another Russian lieutenant bounding into the room. Like my interrogator, he was a peasant from the Ukraine. "We have searched her house and found nothing," he said, in his thick accent.

I pretended that I did not understand what was being said and looked as unconcerned as possible, though my heart was racing with relief. The two men dropped their voices to a whisper and I could not catch what they were saying. Then, the seated Russian took charge of the proceedings again.

"For the time being, the investigation is closed," he said, coldly. "You may leave the room and return to your ward. But when your hospital duties are finished, you will go straight to your villa and remain there. If you do not obey these instructions, I cannot guarantee what will happen to you."

Muller did not respond when I smiled my thanks to him. He had already been relieved of his post and was under arrest and his haggard face showed that he knew what was in store for him. He had always shown me consideration and I had never heard him express Nazi views. As I left the room, I felt a pang of sympathy for him because he was a prisoner. He was a German but he was a doctor, too, and I had seen how he had slaved to relieve suffering.

But in the corridor, I had no more thoughts to spare for the Commandant. I walked slowly back to the ward, thinking about my own terrible position. Beyond doubt, my movements had been observed closely by members of the Czech underground and sooner or later—probably sooner—the Russians would believe the information they had been given. The NKVD were unlikely to vacillate in the same way as the young lieutenant. There would be a short interrogation and if I was fortunate enough to escape torture, I should soon be in a train or lorry, heading for Russia. Even if the NKVD decided to exonerate me on the evidence they had, it could not be long before some of the Latvians in the district were captured and

tortured. I was known to dozens of them and my name was certain to come out.

I kept my gloomy thoughts to myself and all day, ignored the leers of the gawping Czechs, who were now openly swarming all over the hospital. In the evening, I walked wearily and hopelessly to my deserted villa. After all these years of playing hide and seek with fate, it seemed a harsh blow that I should at last find myself in the hands of the Russians.

There was no food in the house and orders had been given that the glucose injections for the staff were to stop immediately. I felt light-headed, lonely, and homesick; I longed for the comforting presence of my mother. I took off my coat, put my head in my hands and felt near to tears.

I do not know how long I had been in this state of utter dejection when I heard a tap on the back door—perhaps an hour or more. It was dark but I was not reluctant to open the door. The knock was a specially agreed signal which I knew could only have been given by a Latvian.

Balodis and a friend were in the villa a few moments later and I gave them the news. They knew that the Russians had broken through the German lines but were not aware that the hospital was in the hands of the Czech underground.

Normally unshakable, Balodis was worried by the new developments. "You are in greater danger than any of us, Asja," he said, thinking at once of my safety rather than his own. "Someone has betrayed you; I blame myself for it. I should have ordered you to leave days ago."

He paced up and down the small sitting-room. "What is there left in the house?" he asked.

I showed him the bare shelves in the kitchen. "No, not food," he said, "though heaven knows we could do with a little of that. I meant arms—ammunition."

I said that there were two revolvers and some ammunition hidden in a corner of the garden and he went out to fetch them. "We must make for Pilsen," he said, stowing one of the revolvers in his pocket and handing the other to his friend. "My information is that the Americans are almost certainly there by now. If we can slip through the German lines somehow, we shall be safe. Or at least," he added, with a grin, "as safe as anybody in this part of the world."

"We?" I said.

"Yes," said Balodis, sharply. "You must come with us. I will not allow you to stay here a day longer."

I was eager to go but I had not thought that Balodis would take me with him. "Give me two minutes to put a few things in a bag and I shall be ready," I said.

We discussed our plans for some time in the darkness and it was after midnight when we crept out of the villa by the back door. I did not think the Russians had enough men to set a guard on the hospital but we took no chances and instead of going through one of the gates, slid through a gap in the hedge.

Once on the road, my depression left me and I felt a sense of exhilaration. At least, I was not condemned to wait, caged up in the hospital, until the Russians had enough evidence to swoop. Out on the open road, under the cover of friendly darkness, we had at least a small chance of fighting for our right to live as free people.

Balodis had the eyes of a cat and the advantage of knowing the country around Dobrzani. We soon turned off the main road and, on the small side roads, made good progress. Occasionally we dropped into ditches until motor-cycle patrols or dispatch riders had roared past and we traversed fields to avoid cross-roads.

As dawn broke, we made for the shelter of a small wood, where, wrapping my coat around me, I sat with my back against a thick tree trunk and fell into an easy sleep.

The sun was shining when I awoke and I guessed that it was about mid-day. Balodis was on watch while his friend slept, curled up as he must have curled long ago in the months before he was born. Balodis gave me an encouraging smile. "I don't know where on earth we are," he said, rubbing the stubble on his chin, "and I am sorry I have found no food. But at least we have water to drink and we are still free."

He was in good spirits. From time to time, the echo of a gun in the distance gave us an idea where the fighting was going on but it did not disturb our rest unduly and when night came, we set off again, a little footsore but hardly conscious that we had not eaten for a long time and still full of hope.

On the third day of our wanderings, we knew that we were hopelessly lost. We slept in a wood overlooking a

fairly large village which was two or three hundred yards away. During the afternoon, loud shouts told us that something unusual was happening. The shouts grew in volume and were punctuated by shots and screams. "The Russians have arrived," predicted Balodis grimly.

We watched the village carefully for signs of Russian troops but could see none. "I am going into the village to find out what is happening," said Balodis.

I tried to dissuade him but he would not listen and crept off, making a wide detour to reach the village.

He was away for nearly two hours and when he returned, his face was grim and his hands trembled as he lighted the end of a cigarette. "What is happening," I asked. "The Russians have come?"

It was some time before he spoke and when he did, his voice had a quavering note in it. "No," he said. "It's not the Russians. It's the Czechs."

In a few brief sentences, Balodis explained what he had seen. He had made use of all the cover he could to get into the village. Watching from behind some trees, he saw no sign of either Germans or Russians but there were plenty of Czechs about with machine guns, revolvers and rifles. They seemed to have taken charge of the village and were assaulting, beating and shooting various inhabitants as they dragged them into the village square.

Balodis met an old woman fleeing down the road and asked her what was going on. Tears were streaming down the old woman's face as she stopped for a moment to tell him. "Don't go into the village," she had implored him. "The Germans have gone and the Czechs of the underground are in charge. The Russians are expected any time but before they arrive, the Czechs are revenging themselves on the collaborators."

Balodis took up the story himself. "I went a little further into the village, watching carefully all the time in case anyone pounced on me. But the Czechs were far too busy to worry about outsiders.

"A whole family was dragged into the square—a man with a bald head, his wife and three fair-haired girls—perhaps of fourteen, fifteen and sixteen, who were all shrieking from terror. The man was lashed with a whip and as he ran to escape the blows, they fired at him—first at his feet to make him jump and then at his body."

Balodis, who had seen many dreadful sights since the

Russians invaded our country, shuddered slightly. "As soon as his screams stopped and he lay twitching on the ground, they turned on the girls. A great fat brute in uniform, gave his gun to someone to hold, tore off the youngest girl's skirt, threw her to the ground and began to rape her."

Involuntarily I put my hand to my mouth as I imagined the scene in the sunlit square. "There was worse to follow," said Balodis in a voice he was just managing to control. "The mother rushed forward and, taking hold of the man's shoulder, said something I could not hear for the cheering. But from her gestures, it was plain that she was offering herself instead of the girl. The man brushed her off with a backward movement of his arm and gave a hoarse command. The next moment, the woman was lying at her daughter's side—dead from a bullet."

"Then," said Balodis slowly, "they dragged the two other girls forward and raped them, too, publicly on the cobble-stones."

Balodis looked towards the village with hatred in his mild brown eyes such as I had never seen before. He threw away the end of his cigarette with a despairing gesture. "Even the Russians would not have behaved like that," he said.

It was some time before we could get the numbing horror of the scene from our minds and talk of other things but Balodis finally gave the lead. "The Germans cannot be far away, if they have only just pulled out of the village, Asja," he said. "They must be retreating towards Pilsen or Prague. What *you* must do is to catch up with them as soon as you can."

"What *I* must do?" I queried.

"Yes," said Balodis, firmly. "If we can judge from what happened there," nodding towards the village, "you are safer among the Germans than the Czechs. You are in German uniform—although I admit it is getting a bit muddly. We could give you some protection but we could not win against an armed band of Czechs. The Germans are falling back towards the Americans—that much is certain. If we can only get you aboard some German transport, you have a chance of reaching safety."

I saw that what Balodis was saying was true but I was reluctant to part company with him. "But you two—you

could never join up with the Germans," I argued, sensing that Balodis was thinking primarily of my safety.

Balodis declined to listen. "Don't worry your head about us," he smiled. "It is the Germans or pseudo-Germans like you that the Czechs are after. We shall be able to look after ourselves all right."

We talked round the subject until we were ready to set off in the dusk again. This time, as soon as we were clear of the village, Balodis set out for what we thought was the main road. His belief that the retreating Germans would stick to the big roads proved to be correct and before daybreak, my companions had identified German transport roaring in what they believed to be the direction of Pilsen.

"For a day or two, we must part," Balodis said, trying hard not to put an emotional touch to the scene. "They will all stop to give a nurse a lift because you might be useful to them if there is fighting." He took my hand in his. "If I did not think it was better this way, Asja, I should not let you go. But Pilsen is a small place. We are bound to meet again soon."

The birds were breaking into their morning chorus. "It does the heart good to hear them," said Balodis.

He and his companion had barely time to plunge into the field by the side of the road when a lorry rounded the bend. I waved to the driver and he pulled up. "I am trying to reach Pilsen," I said.

For all the curiosity on the face of the young driver, it might have been the most natural thing in the world for a nursing sister to be thumbing a lift so early in the morning. But I knew that soldiers of defeated and fleeing armies did not ask unnecessary questions. "I am going near Prague, *fraulein*," he said courteously. "You are welcome to ride so far."

I was helped aboard by other soldiers in the lorry, who made a place for me on a wooden seat. I did not want to go to Prague but it was better than nowhere. One of the soldiers offered me chocolate. I took it gratefully but was careful to do no more than nibble. After being without food for so long, I did not want my stomach to revolt against such a gift from heaven.

PRAGUE in those first days of May, , was no place for a woman. It was no place for a German. It was no place for a civilised human being of any sort. The Czechs knew that the day of their liberation was at hand and were waiting eagerly for the Russians to arrive. They did not want to have to welcome the Americans. In those fateful days, their faces were turned resolutely towards the East. But the Czechs could not wait for either the Russians or at worst, the Americans, and in the early days of May, they rose against their oppressors.

Soldiers on the lorry had warned me when I jumped down into the road near their camp that the situation in Prague was unsettled. "There has been street fighting," said a sergeant. "I advise you to make for the nearest military post where they will be able to tell you whether it is safe to go on."

I might have taken his advice if I had found a military post but the streets were quiet and the shutters of all the houses were in place. I walked warily along, looking for a café, but neither shops nor cafés were open. Though it was still only early afternoon, Prague might have been a city of the dead.

Might have been? It was.

I turned into one of the main squares and saw a spectacle I shall never be able to blot from my mind to the end of my days. I blinked, shut my eyes and opened them again. The spectacle was still there. The Czechs had taken their revenge by hanging from the lamp-posts and balcony rails round the square every German for whom they could find a place.

Most of the dead were Yellow Shirts who were supposed to form an élite corps; they had been giants in size and some of them had probably been "Protector" Heydrich's bodyguard. They swung gently to and fro in the breeze like monstrous, black-faced canaries. A few, for the sake of diabolical variety, had been shot and then hung downwards by their feet like so many carcasses in an abattoir. In spite of their insensate fury, the Czechs had been practical enough to remove the boots of the dead. But they

had also stripped off trousers and left what had been men without a shred of dignity in their shameful death.

I took the scene in quickly, without pity for the dead who had been outraged, or condemnation for those who had wreaked such terrible justice. Prague was just no place for a woman, especially a woman in a German uniform. I knew as I looked around that I must leave at once if I was to have any chance of remaining alive.

I turned quickly from the square into another side street and began to walk in what I believed was the direction of Pilsen, conscious not of the dreadful sight the hangmen had left for all to see, nor of my own hunger or weariness, but only of an overpowering desire to reach Pilsen. The situation there might not be much better than in Prague. Even in my state of near-panic, I realised that. But it could not be worse.

The shops along my new route were also shuttered but I soon discovered I had been wrong to think that the city was entirely deserted. The women and children were at home but a few Czechs in dark blue uniforms were still roving about, looking for loot.

More surprising, groups of German soldiers huddled together in side streets, tearing off their badges and in some cases discarding their tunics altogether.

They were mostly young but they were more demoralised than the Germans I had seen in flight from the Russians in Latvia in the early days of the war. Their dusty faces were streaked with tears and they were afraid to leave the questionable safety of the uncombed side-streets to make a dash for freedom. The Czech butchers had terrorised them into abject submission.

One of them, lounging warily in a shop doorway, recognised my coat and spoke to me. "Have the Russians come yet, *fraulein*?" he asked.

I said I did not think so. "Why not try for Pilsen and surrender to the Americans?" I enquired.

"What's the use?" he said hopelessly. "The Czech Communists are shooting and hanging us on sight."

This defeatist attitude, instead of depressing me, had the opposite effect. I might be weary, dusty, hungry and in fear of my life but I remembered I was a Latvian and not a German. If I had to die, at least I would not meet my end miserably accepting my fate. I owed it to my race to save myself.

I reached the open country without much trouble and rested for a time. Out in the fields, it seemed so peaceful, yet I knew that the old, grey city I had just left would witness deeds more terrible still within days or hours. The memory of what I had seen and what was to come drove me to my feet and carried me onwards.

But there were Germans with more spirit than the soldiers I had spoken to. The first night I slept in a barn belonging to a farm not far from the road. I breakfasted on half a rotten potato I picked up and an egg that a Czech hen had laid away from its usual place and counted myself fortunate indeed.

About mid-morning some German traffic began to roll down the road but none would stop. After I had walked another hour, I overtook a lorry which was being repaired by the side of the road. Some of the soldiers were grouped round the driver who was trying frantically to mend it. The men were older and more phlegmatic. No, they said, the Russians had not yet arrived in Prague, but it was only a matter of hours before they did. They were putting all the distance they could between the Russians and themselves and might succeed in surrendering to the Americans if only Fritz, the driver, would stir himself. Fritz was too busy to reply to this taunt.

"Pilsen?" said a German corporal when I asked him where they were going. "Oh no, we're heading further north. The Americans have not yet reached Pilsen, they say, and the Russians may get there first."

I hung about while the lorry was repaired, and when it was ready the men invited me to ride with them until they turned off the road to Pilsen. I was glad of the lift. In spite of all they said, I was determined to make for Pilsen myself, where I was sure I would once again meet Balodis. With Balodis by my side, I was sure of some protection against the murdering Czechs.

For another night and day I travelled down the road to Pilsen, sometimes alone, sometimes in company with other fleeing German soldiers. When I was given a lift, I was lucky enough occasionally to be handed a piece of German sausage or black bread but it was never much; the soldiers were hungry themselves and only the most disciplined or generous would give away a scrap. Sometimes their panic infected me and I vacillated between going to Pilsen and staying with the troops. I had as much

to fear from the Russians as they; possibly more. But in the end I always thought of my mother and sisters, and of Balodis, who were certain, come what may, to make for Pilsen. I would have friends there. Elsewhere I was not sure what I should find.

It was still light when I saw the first houses of Pilsen in the distance. The last time I had been there as a visitor a few weeks before, I had been so hungry that I had gone into a small grocer's shop in search of food. The woman showed me the shelves of her shop which were scrubbed white—but completely bare.

Then, noticing my crestfallen appearance, she had said: "Come through to the kitchen. I may have a slice of bread or a cup of coffee to spare." I was not in uniform that time and she did not know who I was. "The Russians will soon fill our shelves when they come," she said. The bread seemed to be made from sawdust and the coffee was foul but I thanked her warmly and was glad that I could pay her well.

I was thinking what a feast the sawdust bread and *ersatz* coffee would be now as I dragged myself through the empty streets of Pilsen towards the old Bohemia Palace. I had no idea where I could get food but food had become less important than sleep. I did not ask for luxury or even a proper bed—just a place under a roof where I could rest for the time being. "One night of peace," I prayed silently. "If it is to be my last, let me have a few hours of peaceful sleep, so that I can face what is to come calmly and confidently "

Every house along the street was shuttered and every door shut. I would not have asked for shelter in a Czech house that night but I thought I might have found someone friendly enough to direct me to somewhere to sleep.

Suddenly among the dark and silent houses I noticed one, the massive door of which was slightly ajar. I paused, more from fear, at first, that someone might be lurking behind the door, ready to pounce or shoot. But I could see no light inside and I could hear neither voices nor footsteps. My craving for shelter was so strong that I incautiously pushed open the door wider with my shoulder.

My entry raised no stir and I tip-toed along the tiled hall until I reached a large room on the right-hand side. It was well-furnished in the solid Czech style and quite deserted, though I could tell from the careless way belongings were

scattered about that the room had been lived in recently.

Puzzled, I went back into the hall and called out an enquiry: "Anybody at home?"

My shout, purposely muted, was still loud enough to be heard all over the house. It echoed along the corridor and up the broad stairs. There was no reply. Tired though I was, I could not help being intrigued by the fact that in the middle of Pilsen, a comfortable house which must have belonged to someone wealthy, had been abandoned before the arrival of either the Russians or the Americans.

Or perhaps I was wrong? Maybe the Russians *had* arrived? Or the Americans? My mind, like my body, was too fatigued to grapple with the problem as I went upstairs to explore.

The first room I went into was a bedroom with a bathroom attached. The bed was made up and there were a few cosmetic jars on the dressing-table but no sign of life. I had not seen a carpet so thick or a room so opulently furnished since leaving Riga. Three or four other bedrooms on the same floor were all well-furnished and all unoccupied.

Downstairs again, I went in search of the kitchen. The pots and pans hung gleaming from their hooks and everything else seemed to be in place but the cupboards were as bare as Mother Hubbard's. Searching around systematically, I found one small piece of bread that had turned green with age and mould. I was so hungry that I shut my eyes and ate it.

I had not solved the mystery of the empty house but it was getting dark and I decided that the solution could wait until morning. There seemed to be no point in sleeping in discomfort again. I therefore shut the door, shot the bolt into position, went upstairs and after a bath in which I nearly fell asleep, climbed into bed.

Nothing—neither dreams, nightmares nor pangs of hunger—disturbed my rest. In the morning I awoke and turned over in bed, still drowsy from fatigue. But a moment later, I jerked sharply into full consciousness. The sun was streaming through the heavy velvet curtains and I realised I was in bed in a strange, deserted house in Pilsen.

I was out of the bed in an instant. I had no wish to be caught without clothes by the owner of the house and it did not take me long to dress. I drew the curtain cauti-

ously and looked out. The streets were as deserted as Riga's streets on a Sunday morning—or on the day the Russians invaded us. There was not a soul in sight anywhere.

But I noticed an odd thing. From the windows of most of the flats and houses hung sheets and white towels as symbols of surrender. "So the Russians *are* here," I thought with a sinking heart.

I crept out into the corridor again and listened for movement but the house was as silent as it had been the night before. A quick tour reassured me that I still had it to myself and I was almost disappointed. In this ordeal of waiting, I longed for the companionship of a human being: friendly or hostile, I would not have minded which at the moment.

I thought the situation over carefully and decided that I would stay indoors. It would be suicidal, I concluded, to venture into the streets if the Czech underground was in charge of the town or if the Russians had arrived. Waiting was foreign to my nature. I had always been impatient as a child and my impatience and restlessness had increased in the last few years. But I settled down to pass the time. I sat in an easy chair and brooded on the past but it depressed me so much that I shook myself angrily and began to walk about. I read one or two newspapers that had been left lying about but they were filled with such patent Nazi lies and propaganda that I threw them aside. I knew I must rest to conserve my strength but I could not help going upstairs frequently to look cautiously out of the window. The shadows moved but the streets remained the same—deserted and silent.

Towards evening, while I was upstairs, I heard the first footsteps. They were in the distance and footsteps in rhythm, the marching footsteps of soldiers. I rushed to the window and saw a patrol of men advancing down the street.

They were in a uniform I had never seen before. They were certainly not Germans or Russians and for a moment, I imagined that they were members of the Czech underground who had acquired a new military uniform of their own.

But as I watched, the leader of the patrol barked a command. Then I knew they were neither Russians nor

Germans nor Czechs but the Americans, whom I had struggled for so long to meet.

Wild with excitement, I leaped down the stairs. Pausing to gain my breath for a moment, I opened the heavy door and leaned against the door-post to watch.

The Americans were mostly young and they were nervous and alert. A moment after I appeared one of the soldiers shouted to the sergeant, who ordered his men to cover him while he advanced, his sub-machine gun trained on me.

He stopped eight paces away and said something which I could not understand. I replied in German and the puzzled expression on his face told me that he did not understand me. I produced my German identity card and began to gesticulate in the hope that he would realise that I was hiding in the house.

While the sergeant was scrutinising the document, I glanced at the men guarding him and noticed a peculiar thing. All their jaws moved constantly as if they were chewing a cud and I thought they must be suffering from a new type of shell-shock. I did not realise until later that I was seeing gum-chewing for the first time in my life!

The American handed back my card and talked for a time with his men. I hoped that he would take me straight away to his headquarters but he seemed to have other ideas and pushed me, somewhat roughly, back into the house.

The door closed and I was left to wait alone again. My relief at meeting the Americans left me weak and tremulous, and I sat down as calmly as I could in an arm-chair. This time my vigil was short. Loud banging on the door soon heralded the arrival of another patrol. Their jeep had drawn up outside the house and a young officer was on the door-step. I might have been the most dangerous woman in Europe to judge from the way his men pointed their guns at me.

The officer spoke German with a peculiar nasal drawl. His tone was brusque, his eyes cold and suspicious, and we soon understood each other. In a few brief sentences, I told him my story—that although I held the identity card of a German nursing sister, I was in reality a Latvian from Riga.

He nodded, looking me up and down all the time I

was speaking, in a searching and forbidding manner. Finally he spoke. "Your story would sound all right but for one thing," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. You may be a woman from Riga but you are living in the house reserved for the families of high Gestapo officials."

So that was it! No wonder the house into which I had stumbled was deserted. In spite of the officer's hostile tone, I threw back my head and burst out laughing.

"What is there to laugh about?" enquired the officer, icily.

When I explained how I came to be in the house, the officer's attitude thawed and he smiled with me, though somewhat bleakly, as if he was not entirely convinced by what I said. "You had better come with us, *fraulein*," he said, "and we will get things sorted out."

They helped me into the open jeep after I had fetched my small bag and we drove off through the empty streets at break-neck speed. After nearly four years of living on the slopes of an active volcano, I felt safe at last. My heart sang with exultation at the thought that I had lived safely through the war.

I was not yet as safe as I imagined. There were Russians in Pilsen as well as Americans and British, and they were bent on seizing all against whom they had a grievance.

It seems hard to believe that a country with a vast population of its own and more under tutelage, should go to great lengths to make captive a few people who had opposed, in their puny way, its expansionist plans. Yet that was what was happening in Pilsen and other places where the armies of the West met Russian forces.

When I arrived at the provisional American headquarters in Pilsen—a former police station near the badly-bombed Skoda works—I felt that for the first time in years, I could be frank with my interrogators. I was sick of all the deceit and lies that had been necessary to keep me alive; I determined that I would withhold nothing and embroider nothing. I would tell the whole truth and nothing else.

The American officer before whose desk I now sat was sympathetic but it was soon apparent that he was taking

nothing on trust. I did not try the sort of feminine wiles on him that I had been obliged to use so often in the past. In any case, I had caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. In my dusty clothing and with my emaciated and somewhat neglected appearance, I was hardly a glamorous figure.

"If the Russians had taken me prisoner, they would not have troubled to send me back to Riga for trial," I said, when I had finished my story. "They would have shot me on the spot or transported me to Siberia. To them, I dare not have claimed Latvian nationality. But from you, I will hide nothing."

The officer was straight-forward with me. "You tell an extraordinary story, *fraulein*," he said, in excellent German. "You must know that I shall have to check it before I can give you clearance. But I think you have told the truth. It seems a matter of common-sense," he added with a grin, "that no one, knowing what it was, would go to stay even a single night in Gestapo headquarters at a time like this."

A few more questions and the American called in one of his men. "Take this lady away and see that she gets a good meal."

I thanked him but he waved me out of the room with a kindly smile. "You need some food and rest if your story is true," he said. "For your own sake, we must keep you in our care for a time but I hope it will not be for too long. You seem to have suffered a great deal already."

The meal was bacon and eggs, served in lavish quantities with a mug of steaming coffee to help it down. The strong, appetising aroma made me feel faint. My stomach had contracted so much with my enforced starvation in recent weeks that I could eat only a small portion of it. But I could not yet believe that I should be able to get regular meals in future and I wrapped up what bacon I could not eat in newspaper, as an insurance against the time when I was hungry again.

The following day, I was taken before the officer again. He smiled in a friendly way and placed a chair for me. "I have confirmed that you were not a regular tenant of the Gestapo building," he said. "Luckily for you, the Czechs in the underground kept careful tabs on these things."

He walked round his desk and glanced through a sheaf of notes. "You know a man named Balodis?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, scarcely daring to breathe at the mention of his name.

"Well," said the officer. "Balodis is in Pilsen and we know he is a Latvian. He has vouched for your story. You will soon be free to go, *fraulein*," he said, patting me on the shoulder. "The Allies are fortunate that they had such courageous workers behind the enemy lines."

He pressed a bell and said something in English to an orderly. A few moments later the door opened and Balodis himself strode into the room. We looked at each other without speaking for a time and Balodis then embraced me. We had not been separated for more than a few days, yet it seemed like centuries.

"This is Asja," Balodis said, turning to the American. Balodis kissed my hand and said to me: "Thank God you are safe, Asja. I have never stopped blaming myself for letting you out of my sight."

We Latvians are not an emotional people like the Slavs but I was near tears as much at the warmth of his welcome as at the fact that I was free to go. "Thank God you, too, are safe," I said.

The American was busy stamping documents. "This paper will save you from molestation for the time being," he said, "in a few days' time you must appear before a composite board of Americans, British and Russians. I cannot say what decision they will reach about you but we must leave the future to take care of itself. In the meantime," he said, opening the door, "I have a lot to do. I wish you good-day and good-luck."

We went out into the sunshine and for the first time for years, it felt good to be alive. We walked to a hotel which had been taken over by the Americans, where Balodis introduced me to some friends he had made already. "You are just in time to hear Winston Churchill on the radio," said one of them, as we sat sipping watery Pilsen lager.

The war, I now learned, had ended in Europe and the British Prime Minister was speaking more of the future than of the victory. I did not understand what the gruff, measured voice was saying, but a German-speaking American major translated for us as he spoke.

"On the continent of Europe, we have yet to make sure

that the simple and honourable purposes for which we entered the war are not brushed aside or overlooked in the months following our successes, and that the words 'freedom,' 'democracy' and 'liberation' are not distorted from their true meaning as we have understood them.

"There would be little use in punishing the Hitlerites for their crimes if law and justice did not rule and if totalitarian or police governments were to take the place of the German invaders . . ." translated the American. "It is the victors who must search their hearts in their glowing hours and be worthy by their nobility, of the immense forces that they wield."

Did Churchill in his glowing hour suspect that freedom, democracy and liberation which he had done so much to secure for his own country would become empty words for little Latvia? I had a foreboding as I listened to his words, among the gay Americans, that Churchill had peered into the future and seen the dark things that were to happen.

It was bright and cheerful in the commandeered hotel but we could not stay there all night and when we emerged into the street, I asked Balodis what his plans were. "Oh, we can get beds in the 'bunker,' " he said.

The "bunker" or doss-house was in the cellar of a large building and for the price of a few pence, beds were available for refugees with nowhere else to go. The windows were mere slits and the lighting was so inadequate that the whole place was like an animal's lair. Men, women and children were mixed up together without privacy and as some of them had been on the run for days, the smell was indescribable.

But, far worse than the gloom and the smell were the visits paid by zealous members of the Czech underground. They, exerting the small amount of authority given to them by the Americans, often awakened the sleepers in the middle of the night and demanded to see their clearance papers.

I had tasted the delights of a night's sleep in a comfortable bed in the Gestapo building and to come to this sort of living again made me want to shriek. But there was nothing else to do except sleep in the "bunker" at night and live on the generosity of the Americans during the day.

The Americans were open-handed and full of fun. The

war for them was as good as over and they were determined to squeeze a little joy out of life. They were just glad to be alive when so many of their comrades were dead. I could be gay with them but at night, in the "bunker," when my sleep was disturbed by the nightmares of the other refugees and the rude commands of the Czechs, my heart was filled with despair again. I was haunted by the thought that the Russians might still snatch me away and the future took on the black and hopeless appearance it had done so often in the past.

My despondency deepened at the thought of the last supreme ordeal which lay ahead. It came about a week later. I was reporting daily to the American headquarters for instructions and one morning, after waiting in the corridor for some time, a military policeman asked me to step into another room. I had no idea what he wanted. But "screening" of some sort was such a routine part of life that I did not worry.

"Sit down, *fraulein*," said one of the three officers behind a trestle table. He was an American and leaned back informally, tilting his chair on two legs. He offered me a cigarette, which I refused. His colleagues were a British officer and a Russian.

I knew now that this was a mixed military board and that my future would be decided by what happened in the next few minutes. But I felt no tension. There had been so many crises in my life that although this was the last and most important I could summon up no excitement: only a sort of guarded weariness and longing to be free from the eternal probing and questioning which I had endured for so long.

The American by his manner put me at ease at once. Name? Occupation? Length of service?

"I am a nursing sister of the Wehrmacht," I said.

"You look like a Baltic national to me," growled the Russian. "Why don't you want to go home?"

"Surely," said the British officer, smoothly, "if she's a German, she is already at home. How can she want to go home?"

"That's right," said the American, with a boyish grin. "How can she, now?"

The Russian was in a bad temper. The brevity of his questions told me that the American knew more than he was prepared to say—he must have read the notes on

my first questioning—but the British officer seemed less friendly. His questions were to the point and phrased in legal language. If he had a heart, it was certainly not on display.

"We know that at Dobrzani, this woman associated with Baltic nationals," said the Russian, sourly. "Tell me," he demanded, "why did you run away from there when the Soviet forces were near the hospital?"

"Because I was frightened. I wanted to get to Hanover, where my mother is," I said.

"A likely story," said the Russian, sarcastically. "She's no German. She's a German in disguise. She comes from one of the Baltic states. And I," said the Russian, banging the table and raising his voice, "I will be responsible for sending her back there."

The smile vanished from the American's boyish face and he seemed to put on ten years in the space of a second. It seemed as though it had suddenly struck him that the moment of truth had arrived in the life of one woman. Freedom or bondage? Life or death?

The struggle between the three men at the table, who had never seen me before I entered the room, was for *my* life and *my* freedom. I felt weak and fought hard to retain my composure.

"Well," said the American, "the girl's evidence is that she is German and in the absence of any other evidence, I am prepared to believe her. My vote is that she is a German national."

"And my vote is for her repatriation to the Baltic states, where she belongs," shouted the Russian, angrily.

I saw the two officers look at the third. The Russian had a fierce glare on his face and the American's eyebrows were raised so that his forehead showed half a dozen horizontal lines from one side to the other. Unable to bear the strain any longer, I turned my eyes away.

I had been looking at a damp patch on the wall for what seemed to be minutes when a precise voice said: "I say she is German. That makes two votes to one."

I heard the scratching of pens on paper before anybody spoke again. Then the Englishman, without a change in the tone of his voice, addressed me. "*Fraulein*," he said, "we have decided that you will go to Hanover as soon as transport is available."

Relief made me feel faint and when I tried to stand up,

my legs refused to function. The faces of the three officers in front of me swam up and down and from side to side: At last, all became clear again and I was able to smile.

"You may go, *fraulein*," said the British officer, "you are free to go now."

Epilogue

The simple story I have told is of events that happened long ago and are now generally forgotten. For me, the story had a happy ending, although my beloved country is still under the heel of the Soviets and I have not seen it since. It makes me unbearably sad to think that probably I never shall.

But personally, as recompense for all the bad things that came my way in war-time, I have spent many happy years in Britain since.

The Western Allies were as good as their word and provided me with transport to Hanover. There, I passed the time working as a dentist's assistant until I was granted political asylum in Britain.

I had hoped to be able to settle down at once but *wanderlust* took hold of me and I tried my luck in Argentina. After a time I returned to Britain where I met and married a former squadron leader in the R.A.F. Now, I lead the sedate life of a housewife in a south of England resort.

Of my sisters, Elsa who stayed in Flensburg went to America, Berta went to Australia and the two others stayed in the western zone of Germany.

With my mother, my three sisters reached the American lines safely, although they were first captured by the Russians and had to break out of a prison compound to do so. My mother, indomitably cheerful to the last in spite of all she had suffered, died some years later while staying with me in England.

I do not know whether my father and brother or the sister we had to leave behind in Riga, are dead or alive today. News filters through various channels of some Latvian families but none has ever come through about them.

Of all the patriots who have been given names in this book, I met only one after the war—the sturdy, fearless

Balodis. He too was given asylum in the Western zone of Germany and later came to Britain but I did not meet him until many years later. He, alas, was weighed down by the sufferings of his countrymen, and by personal sorrows and died a tragic death.

Nunc dimittis. I remember as I go, and every day of my life, the deeds of our patriots, dead and alive, who resisted the Red invaders, and those who still resist the ravishers of my beloved country Latvia.